

Sealed

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Summary: Pandora IF: In a self-sacrificing move, he sealed himself with her. In a dark void existing in a separate space, devoid of anything and everything except each other. (Inspired Story)

***Chapter 1*: The Endless Feeling of Together**

This story was inspired by another one similar to this. It's called "The Wise And The Witch," by Flugel124. It's a pretty short yet very interesting read. I highly recommend taking a look at it. I don't wish to copy that story in its entirety, just use similar concepts and ideas. Since that one likely isn't being continued, I thought I could make my own version of it that expands on some ideas I had, as well as hopefully continue it after. I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 1: The Endless Feeling of Together

Subaru looked across the empty, dark void in front of him, mentally sighing as he stared. He refused to blink, to even move from the position he sat in. His right arm rested on his right knee, which bent upward, as his left leg stayed stretched ahead of him with his left arm by his side. His mind was focused on staring ahead of him, and only that.

One would ask, "What could he be staring at? He's in the middle of an endless, dark abyss of the void." While, normally, that would be a good point since there's typically nothing to look at in the void, it, however, was not the case here.

What Subaru stared so intently at, was what looked to be a young girl. Her long, straight platinum hair gave off an almost alluring glow, very noticeable through the darkness around them. Her eyes reminded Subaru of the ocean, protected by long, similarly alluring eyelashes. She was seated as well, only wearing her signature white cloth, a blank expression on her face as she stared back at him.

That's how it's been for a few months now. Was it months? Or was it years? Subaru couldn't tell. Time wasn't a sense one had in this type of space. It didn't feel fast or slow, it just felt as though he existed.

He remembered how this happened. He remembered the seal, luring the Witch of Vainglory to him and performing the ultimate sacrifice to save everyone. He left everybody behind, to make sure they were safe. That was something he believed was worth it.

He remembered when they first arrived. The Witch seemed amused, going as far as to try to use her authority to escape. It didn't work. She tried a few times, before she gave up. At that point Subaru knew his own power, if you could even call it that, wouldn't work either. He didn't bother to try.

That was the first time the Witch of Vainglory broke her calm demeanor. Subaru witnessed the change that took centuries to happen. Her face itself displayed a variety of different emotions at the time. She had at the time underestimated him and had now become desperate, trying to get free through any means she could hope to find.

At one point, she tried to attack him with her own hands. When one of her strikes made contact with him, his body had not only taken zero damage, but he couldn't feel anything either. That's when Subaru learned that you couldn't get hurt or die in this place. Basic human needs like eating and drinking were also unnecessary, and even though they couldn't feel anything physically, they could still feel their emotions. They couldn't even sleep, either. Essentially, they merely only existed in this place and would continue to do so for all eternity.

After that, at some point, they learned that even though the void seemed infinite, it was not. In reality, it was merely a small, invisible box that surrounded them on all sides. It certainly explained why they were able to stand, sit and generally exist. It wasn't long before the two of them chose two separate ends and occupied them. Ever since then, they've only sat and stared at one another. It was all they could do, honestly. The void never darkened them; in fact, they could see each other as clearly as it were daytime.

It eventually dawned on Subaru that he would outlive everyone he left behind. This space existed outside of the natural realm, preventing them from needing basic human necessities and dying. He — they — would outlast decades, centuries, maybe eons worth of progression and life. It didn't bother him, really. As long as they were able to live and grow old happy then he was content with that.

They hated one another, he and the Witch. It was especially clear after they had first been sealed here. It used to be glares instead of stares, initially. He wanted to say he still hated her, but... it tired him. Holding one emotion constantly for so long extinguishes it. That's what happened to Subaru's hatred for her, and similarly her hatred for him. Their glares turned into blank, unwavering stares.

The silence, the loneliness they both felt was agonizing. Trapped within their own minds, the silence exploded in their ears. Time felt more prolonged than it actually was, enabling them to suffer in their heads more than before. Those years felt like an eternity.

On the brink of insanity and suffering eternal loneliness, words finally broke the wall. The wall that stood for years: the wall of silence. When words pierced that wall and entered their ears, they continued. They desired someone to talk to, to be with, to quench the feeling that was their loneliness.

When they talked, they made sure to make it last. They didn't want it to stop. They loved talking to one another. It grew on them more and more as it progressed. They talked about anything they could, anything they could find, but eventually they didn't even care about what it was. They just wanted to talk to each other. He started calling her by her name, and she called him by his. They talked for years.

"You know, I'm not from this world."

"Oh?"

"I'm from an island nation to the east called Japan. I suppose you haven't heard of it, nobody has."

"I have. The Great Sage, like you, came from that world."

"Really, him?"

"Mhm."

"I'm interested. I actually never knew that, could you tell me more?"

"The Great Sage, as I said, was someone that was from your homeland. He suddenly appeared in this world through something unknown. Other than that, all I know is that he trained himself in all kinds of magic, before going on to seal the Witch of Envy away."

"I see."

At some point, Subaru blurted out, "I can return by death." Along with the nullification of any and all authorities, the curse that followed him was included. He was free to speak of everything here. "I've died so many times..."

"How many times?"

"More than I can count, at this point."

She was silent for a little while after that. Subaru didn't like the silence, it felt like the eternity of loneliness was coming back for him and he had grown to detest that as their conversations grew common.

Eventually, she spoke, "Do you wish to talk about it?"

"Yes, please."

"When did you first die?"

"The same day I came to this world, and when I met Emilia. We tracked a thief that stole her insignia to a loot house in the slums. Everyone was killed by Elsa, the Bowel Hunter."

"Ah, her."

"You know her?"

"Mhm. Her and Archbishop Emerada share an intriguing relationship."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, perhaps. I never thought to meddle, at the time I perceived her as a good tool to us."

"I see."

"Please continue with your story. I apologize for interrupting. I'm interested in how this all ends."

"When I first returned by death I was really confused." He faintly chuckled at his past self. "It was all surreal. I didn't know what happened and I was completely clueless. Other than this curse of mine I had nothing in a brand new, dangerous world. I was just Natsuki Subaru, who was broke beyond compare."

"Then how did you manage to defeat her, if you were so disorganized and as powerless as you say?"

"Well, I died two more times after that."

"Oh?"

"I got killed by her again after trying to get the insignia back early. And the other death was an embarrassing mistake."

"Interesting. What was that death, then?"

"You won't leave me alone until I say it, will you?"

"Nope."

He sighed, "I got killed by three thugs in an ally after embarrassing myself in front of an entire street of people."

He heard her let out an uncharacteristic giggle, which surprised him, "Well I certainly can't blame you for that. As you said, you had nothing in a brand new world. You were only Natsuki Subaru, broke beyond compare."

Subaru let his mouth form a faint smile, "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

He continued to talk about his time at the mansion, not sparing much of any details. He wished to keep the conversation going, and he felt solace in the fact he was able to confide all of his bottled up secrets to someone at last without worry. In a way, he felt like his old self was there.

"I'm sure you know that I was a major player in defeating the Whale."

"Oh yes, I'm acutely aware."

"But did you know *how* I beat it, exactly?"

"Unfortunately not. I only received news that it had been slayed, not the methods in which it happened. What role did you play in its subjugation?"

Subaru felt a bit of his prideful self return in this moment, "Oh, not much, I only rallied the army when they had no hope, was the bravest man on the battlefield and acted as bait."

"I'm sorry, you acted as bait? I assume it's due to your smell?"

"Yup! A good portion of the battle was me being bait. Toward the end when it split apart I even rocketed up to the real one, stood on its horn to get its attention and then plummeted to the ground so it would follow me!"

"I cannot tell if you're foolish or brave."

"Hey! I looked really cool, you know!"

He continued to tell her about everything. He finished his story about the Whale Hunt, telling her all about the battle and what he had to do to get there. He told her about the battle against Petelguese. He didn't even notice he was basically bragging about defeating *her* cult, but even so she didn't mind at all. After that, he spoke of the Sanctuary, about Roswaal, the Great Rabbit, Beatrice, the trails, everything. It was refreshing and nice, both relishing in their conversation.

Pandora also talked a lot. She had lived for many, many years, after all. It was only natural that she had a lot to talk about. "You know, I was born this way. My natural looks and a power I couldn't control influenced everything around me."

"So you were born a witch?"

"Essentially, yes. Over time, I discovered my authority and merely used it for my own benefits."

"And I suppose that led to the cult, eventually."

"Yes."

"What was the cult's overall plan, anyway? To resurrect the Witch of Envy?"

"No, no. It's something... more selfish."

"Then what?"

She merely looked at him, then slightly altered her gaze downward, "I do not think it matters now."

He was unsure of what to say for the moment.

"You intrigue me, Natsuki Subaru." Her gaze was back on him.

"Why's that?"

"Hm... reasons."

"I'm not going to let you leave it at that."

"Oh, but I should hold some kind of suspense, no?"

"You'd just tell me eventually, you know."

"True," she giggled. "I'm still not going to say, though."

"Fine then, keep your secrets."

She went into detail about her childhood, her own sufferings and how she became the Witch of Vainglory. It was a story that Subaru couldn't help but intensively listen to. He found himself captivated in her tale, about her own life, as she was for his.

"Say, Subaru."

"Yeah?"

"Do you ever regret leaving everyone behind?"

"...Yeah, of course."

"Then why did you?"

Subaru thought for a moment, "I wanted them to live their future safely and happily, even if it didn't have me in it."

"That wouldn't make them happy."

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't it? They're safe, happy, together. What's there not to be happy about?"

She sighed, "Because the future didn't have you in it."

"..."

"You truly still value yourself as expendable in the face of everyone else's happiness? Is that why you came here with me, because you thought your life was low enough to sacrifice over theirs?"

"..."

"Say, Subaru."

"Hm?"

"What's it like to be loved by the people around you?"

"I-... Why are you asking that?"

"It is foreign to me."

"Really? Don't get me wrong, but I find that a bit hard to believe considering... you know."

"Yes, really. All interpretations of love that I've ever known were just fake concepts brought on by those affected by my appearance. It has been like that since I was a child. My looks were often defined as an 'inhuman beauty' and those that laid eyes on me often erupted into an endless tremble. Those I even merely glanced at would be swooned in eternal happiness."

"That must have been tough for you."

"At first. I grew accustomed to it and used it for my own benefit. Because, why not? They were so willing to do it themselves, weren't they?"

"Is that still how you think now, Pandora?"

"...I do not know what to think now."

"That's surprising. How come?"

"Say, Subaru."

"Yeah?"

"Remember when I said that you intrigued me?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, how do I put this..."

Subaru didn't quite know how to process what he was seeing. The girl in front of him, Pandora, known for her indifferent calm demeanor just developed a minor blush on her pale cheeks and averted her gaze like a shy school girl. *Pandora*. Of all people. This prison was really making them something else, wasn't it.

"You're different."

"Different how? I know my eyes are scary-looking, if that's what you mean, but I got that from my mom and I can't help it."

She actually seemed amused, "Not that. You. As an individual. You are unlike anyone I have ever met."

Subaru did not know how to intercept those words. He didn't press and she didn't proceed to explain. It was left on an open note, as they moved to another topic.

When they ran out of topics, they often talked about what could have been. Talk of the future often took up their time, as they indulged in various possibilities. Sometimes they even put themselves in a brand new world, imagining a new life from zero in a foreign place, or even imagining things in a scenario if they ever went back to the world they knew. It reminded Subaru of when he first arrived in Lugnica, in a way.

They made sure to hold on to each and every conversation. To remember everything. They didn't want to forget it. The years wouldn't take this from them.

So their bond grew over time. As they talked, necessity and need turned into fondness and care. Their words to one another started to possess a particular sweetness. They often mused of life before this, how they had been at each other's throats, glaring at one another across the room, and now they couldn't help but dote on each other.

At one point they became closer. Physically, emotionally and mentally. They had ended up crawling toward one another, meeting in the middle and latching arms and intertwining hands. They didn't know why, at first. Perhaps it was their loneliness again driving a need for physical contact. It didn't bother them, though; the intimacy actually felt quite nice. They never let their hands separate.

As time continuously droned on, feelings began to change between them. Mutual feelings of compassion and love started to bloom like it was spring. It became noticeable in their talkings, both of them not even knowing it. The feelings, their conversation, just all seemed so natural to them. It was as if nothing was wrong, nothing was different; they just enjoyed the moments.

"Say, Subaru," Pandora suddenly, randomly prompted.

"Yeah, Pandora?"

"You make me feel things I've never felt before."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you recall when I told you about my childhood? My sense of love?"

"Of course I remember."

"It's about that."

"Oh."

"I did not expect such a mundane reaction. Do you not like that?"

"It's not that. I just... I don't know what to say. I'm a bit surprised, honestly."

"When I said you were different from anyone I had ever met, it was because of how you treated me. Especially after we came here. It was nice."

"I don't follow..."

She giggled to herself, "Sorry, sorry. Maybe I should be more blatant. I like you as a whole; your genuinity, your resolve. I like your personality. I like your genuinity. I like your eyes. I like the way you hold my hand. I-"

"Alright, alright. I get it."

She giggled again. Subaru could never get used to that sound; though, he didn't think of it as a bad thing. "That started to turn into a rant." He sighed, "I didn't expect you of all people to start professing this kind of thing, to me especially."

"Spending an infinite amount of time alone with someone changes a person."

"I suppose it does."

"Say, Subaru."

"Yes, Pandora?"

"I think I love you."

"..."

"Nothing? Do you still love those other girls?"

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't still hold them very dear to my heart." It was one of the reasons he did this, after all. Wasn't it?

"Oh."

They sat in silence for what felt like another eternity. It threatened to eat them whole, and Pandora felt as if she had made a mistake. She felt her mind start to tear; she didn't want him to refuse her, to leave her. His words broke the silence:

"Say, Pandora."

"Yes, Subaru?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

As time endlessly passed, that love only grew. Eventually, anything before their time together became a distant story, a blur which threatened to fade in the back of their minds. It was an unnecessary distraction in the path of their love. They had each other, they only needed each other. Those were the facts the two of them faced, as they came together more and more.

At one point, love turned into necessity. One could not live without the other anymore. They only had one another, they only needed each other. In essence, they belonged to each other.

With this new conversation developed. They mused the future; a future where they were eternally together, out of this prison, engulfed in their love. Perhaps they'd live a happy life, or even raise a family. It was nice to think about. Though, despite their drabbles, they never felt willing to completely commit to escaping. Why would they need to? Want to? They had everything they needed right there with them. At this point,

what they were in was not a seal, not a prison, but a place of union. A place where they could love for all eternity.

Perhaps it was due to the accumulating insanity in the both of them, that they thought that. They hardly cared much. Falling into madness was inevitable. They started to bicker and fight about anything and everything possible. Their talks of ideologies and philosophy is what caused it. They disagreed to the point that they agreed. After years of that, it leveled into a constant. A pure, straight consistency of personality and identity from the both of them. Conversation ceased, and all that remained was true understanding. They truly became one in the same.

That did not stop the insanity, though. No, that was still as there as the darkness around them was. The void drove them mad. It finally broke them.

Their insanity made them desperate for something to do. They tried to have fun with intimacy. However, while they were able to feel the unyielding attraction and arousal necessary for it, the lack of feeling in their bodies made it impossible to properly do, much less enjoy. No matter what they tried, no matter how creative they tried to be with their actions, their ideas, it all led to the same place. A dead end. There was truly nothing they could do.

After another millennia passed, they realized that there was. Their minds finally seemed to expand into the sense of realization. They sat together, facing each other, arms and legs wrapped around the other in an everlasting embrace. Everything else became meaningless. Nothing mattered other than this. They would never move, not even a singular muscle. They merely relished in the other's presence. That was all they needed, for all eternity.

That's how it was, that's how it stayed. The black, silent and empty void entered a peace of singularity in the love of two individuals.

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A whoosh. A small gust of air, in the form of a gentle breeze brushed into them.

Then it increased. An intense pressure of wind, one not felt for millennia, made its presence known.

The darkness on all sides began to become lighter, whiter, brighter. A bright light, other than their bodies, became present.

The faintest of rumbling. A soft pull, which grew stronger, invaded their space.

Their embrace mysteriously clamped tighter, as every new thing around them became overwhelming.

It was all new. It was all different. What was happening?

Yes, what was happening? What is happening?

What happened?

***Chapter 2*: The Seal of Eternity**

I did not expect this story to take-off the way it did. First of all, I appreciate it a lot and I'm glad you all enjoyed it enough to want more.

However, I feel like I should say this before the story continues. The way you choose to take this is 100% up to you. Though I am going to continue this story, it is up to you on what you want to consider as 'canon'. For example, if you feel as though you want to leave only the first chapter canon, then that is perfectly okay. Either way, the story works; it can end where it began or it could continue onward. Whether the story from here on is canon to you, is up to you.

While this story and it's overarching plot are going to be mostly original, I should say that there may be some minor spoilers for Arc 5 and beyond. I'll try to keep it minimal, but please be warned. This chapter in particular is important to the overall plot, establishing Subaru's current outside relationships, world building and somewhat drawing on previously stated material in the LN/WN (though that knowledge isn't necessarily required in order to read this). I was going to add more to this chapter, but I think it ends on a decent spot. The other stuff can be surprises for future chapters. On one final note, the story takes place an undisclosed amount of time in the future.

Chapter 2: The Seal of Eternity

~One Hour Before Being Sealed~

"You know, Subaru," a voice spoke. "It would be much easier to get through this expedition, *the one you insisted on doing*, if you were completely with us, I suppose."

Subaru shook his head, escaping out of his daze. He had zoned out, albeit unintentionally. He looked to his side at his contracted spirit, who was currently boring into his soul with a narrowed look. He put a palm behind his head, nervously rubbing it as he spoke to her, "Ah, sorry. I was just thinking about what we could be facing up ahead."

It wasn't a lie, he was thinking about that. However, it was much more than just simple contemplation of what may lie ahead. In fact, he was thinking of ways to *avoid*, or at the very least beat, what was ahead.

Subaru couldn't help but get lost in his own mind as he thought about the dangers ahead. It did kill him, after all. It had only been once, but he had died in the ruins ahead. He didn't even entirely know how it happened, either. He remembered something lunging at him, an intense amount of pain around his head before his vision went dark and he found himself starting over at his checkpoint. He swore he'd never get used to dying, but, in a way, he considered that a good thing.

"Hmph!" His contacted spirit straightened her posture and puffed her cheeks, looking proud. "That's why Betty is here, in fact! To make sure my no-good, useless contractor won't have to worry so much, I suppose."

"Ouch, Beako! That stung! I can take care of myself sometimes, you know!" He put his hand over his heart in mock hurt, as he put his other arm to his eyes to fake wiping tears.

"From what Betty has seen, it always seems like the contrary, I suppose. But... as long as Betty is here, she will protect you, in fact."

He shook his head, a smile of amusement on his face as he gave her a few head pats. He treasured moments such as these. Moments where he and the people he cared about got along, could laugh together and just generally have fun. The genuine

friendships and people in his life was something he cherished far more than anything else.

"What are we waiting for, I suppose." Beatrice once again brought him out of his inner musings, speaking in an impatient tone, looking at her contractor with a hint of frustration.

"Backup," Subaru answered simply, putting his fists against his waist and straightening his back, head held high in one of his poses.

"Why would we need that, I suppose."

He brought his gaze back to her, a small yet smug smile on his face, "Because we don't know if there's too much for us to handle in there, I suppose."

"Did you just mock Betty?!"

"I did, I suppose."

The sounds Beatrice made after that statement were cute, unapproving growls as she puffed her cheeks and stomped her foot like a child. Subaru smiled in satisfaction that his teasing worked.

The two talked and bantered back and forth for a while as they waited for Subaru's 'backup' to arrive. It didn't take too long, though, as soon the two noticed a single carriage approaching from the distance.

Both Beatrice and Subaru got up and presented themselves to greet the newcomers. Once the carriage came to a halt in front of them, its passengers wasted no time in getting off.

"Good to see you again, my friend," a courteous and respectful voice spoke, approaching Subaru and his contracted spirit.

Subaru smiled, holding out his hand in front of him, "Reinhard, good to see you too. Thanks for showing up." He used his other hand to give his friend a thumbs up.

Reinhard gladly took his friend's hand, a small smile present on his face as well. "I am happy to be here. Lady Felt was actually quite insistent that I come to assist you."

"Wait, really? What did she say?"

"I believe she instructed me to 'make sure big bro doesn't get himself killed.'"

"Ouch!" He put a hand to his heart again, as if he were hurt. "Does nobody think I can take care of myself these days?!" He swore he heard a snicker from the loli next to him.

"You did ask me to come as well, didn't you, Subaru-*kyun*?" Another voice stated, coming alongside the Sword Saint.

Subaru sighed, almost deadpanning. "Yeah, I did, Felix."

"Asking Lugnica's best healer to accompany you on an expedition is implying that somebody is going to need to be healed, Subaru," A third voice spoke, approaching from the Sword Saint's other side, Julius Juukulius.

"And, what, did you assume it was for me?!" Subaru cried out dramatically, flailing his arms at his sides as the two knights by the Sword Saint's side just shared glances. When Subaru looked at Julius and Felix, they gave him smiles that made Subaru playfully deflate.

Reinhard kept a steady, comfortable smile on his face as he watched his friends' antics. Though, it was quickly replaced with a different expression, one tinted with a bit more seriousness.

"We got Emilia-*sama*'s letter, Subaru," the redhead spoke, looking at Subaru, who had now regained his composure and put on a more serious face as well. "She spoke of this being something of great importance?"

Subaru nodded, looking up at his overpowered friend. "Yeah, I asked her to send out letters for you guys to be here."

Despite his own pride, and wanting to look good in front of Emilia, he begrudgingly asked her to assist him by sending out letters to her fellow candidates for their knights. Though he had only died once, what killed him was something he wasn't sure he could handle alone with just Beatrice. So, he thought it best to play it safe and call for backup rather than try to rush back in unprepared and die again. The letters weren't too specific, however they did specify a request for these knights in particular to assist Subaru on an expedition. Said expedition wasn't exactly clarified either, just that it was of great importance according to Subaru.

Subaru wasn't entirely sure if the other candidates would even allow for their knights to do this, in fact he would have bet that'd refuse, but it seemed as though he was wrong. It was surprising, but he was happy that they agreed to help him. Though, he had asked Emilia to send a letter to *all* of the candidates, meaning Priscilla refused to send Al, since he wasn't here.

"If this was as important as insisted, then shouldn't we have more people here, nyan?" Felix asked, a finger under his chin in mock thought.

Subaru looked at him, crossing his arms. "I thought it would be better to keep this discreet. You don't know who might spread this kind of information to places we want no part of."

"A reasonable concern," Julius nodded, agreeing.

"I also thought that this might be a great time to hang out and bond as friends!"

"I would hardly call an important expedition, one that you insist requires secrecy, an opportune time to bond as friends," Julius retorted, truthfully. Although he did possess a small smile due to his friend's antics. "Though, if I may ask, what is here that requires such secrecy?"

Subaru straightened his posture, leaning back a little with his arms crossed. He developed a prideful smile as he spoke, "Well, during my time in Vollachia I found something that was connected to the Great Sage! I did a lot of private research and, well, eventually it brought me here!"

"The Great Sage," Reinhard muttered to himself. "I can understand why you would want to keep this confidential. The Great Sage is a particularly unknown subject, and any such information about them or their possessions could be considered dangerous."

If I may-" Julius interjected. "You said that the clues you found led you here?"

"Yup! Right here, this exact spot!"

"Nyah, Subaru-*kyun*. You know that this is the middle of nowhere, right?" Felix spoke, looking around at the landscape around them. It wasn't an entirely bad sight, there was just nothing of significance around them other than a few large hills. The one they were standing at in particular had an almost perfectly vertical incline, with a small cliff hanging overhead.

"That's just what they want you to think!" Subaru exclaimed proudly, clearly showing off that he knew exactly what he was doing.

"Are you sure, Subaru?" Julius asked. "I do not mean to doubt you so indiscriminately, but this just seems..."

"Hmph! Betty's contractor knows exactly what he's doing, I suppose!" Beatrice stepped to her contractor's side, interrupting Julius to express her faith in him, which Subaru found adorable.

Julius bowed his head, a soft smile on his face, "My apologies, Great Spirit-*sama*."

"In any case," Subaru looked to his red headed friend, who had stayed silent, watching their banter with a comfortable smile on his face. "Reinhard, I'm sure you can vouch for me here."

Reinhard nodded, "Indeed, Subaru. You are telling the truth."

Subaru imitated a prideful pose, a large, toothy smile on his face. "What we're here for is just behind here." He jabbed this thumb behind him, in reference to the stone incline.

Felix looked at Subaru in an expression of hesitancy at his friend's words, "Isn't that just a stone wall?"

Subaru deadpanned at him, "Oh, Felix, you poor fool. You're being deceived!"

"I am?"

"Yes! Because!" Subaru dramatically rolled his arms along one another, before pointing at the wall with both hands. "There's something strange about that wall!"

The three knights and spirit looked at the wall, trying to find the abnormality Subaru mentioned. Eventually they all got closer to the stone to inspect it, looking the wall over at every possible angle. After a few moments, Reinhard put his ear against the stone, as if he were listening to it, putting the back of his finger against the wall and lightly tapping it.

"It's hollow," he stated, getting everybody else's attention.

"So quick!" Subaru exclaimed in surprise. He would never admit it, even if he could, but it took him exceedingly longer to find that on his previous loop. Though, he quickly composed himself, "Yes, that's right! There's an entryway behind that wall!" After hearing what Subaru said, everyone looked back at the wall. "Now, to open it, you have to-"

He was interrupted by a mesh of sounds. It sounded as though a tremendous force crashed into some rock, shattering it and making them bang against one another until they settled on the ground. Well, that's exactly what happened. Ahead of him, he noticed that Reinhard had, instead of looking for any kind of secret way to open it, just decided to blow the entrance open.

"Or... that works too," Subaru mumbled, deflating in a defeated manner.

Reinhard heard his mumbling, looking back over at his friend with a look of uncertainty, "Oh, my apologies. Was I not supposed to do that?"

Subaru looked at him, shaking his head, "Don't worry about it, Reinhard!" He laughed in both amusement and awkwardness. Sometimes the world just wouldn't let him show off.

Subaru reconvened with his companions at the newly created entrance. Gazing inside, they could all clearly see the staircase leading down into an ominous darkness.

They formed up before going down the stairs. Julius took the lead in the front, lighting the way ahead of them with help from his buds. Subaru, Beatrice and Felix trailed behind with Reinhard at their flank.

"By the way," Subaru started, gaining everyone's attention as they carefully descended. "From what I found, there's supposed to be three rooms in this place. The first room is supposed to be some sort of combat trial, the second room is supposed to be a trial

revolving around a puzzle of some sort, and the third is the final room and what we're here for."

"This seems very reminiscent of those 'fantasy dungeons' you told Betty about, I suppose." Beatrice commented, staying close to Subaru as she held his hand.

Felix looked over at Subaru, "Fantasy dungeons? What are they?"

The raven-haired knight looked back at the catboy, a small smile on his face, "In my homeland, we have these mythical stories that sometimes have dungeons in them. Those dungeons often have treasure at the end of them, but in order to get there you have to get through it's challenges, or trials." Subaru finished giving the summary of a vast amount of video games he's played.

"Your homeland seems to be full of wondrous things," Reinhard spoke from the back. "I'm sorry if this is too selfish of me to ask, but would it trouble you to teach me some things about your homeland sometime? Or, perhaps recite some tales?"

Subaru smiled a little wider, "No need to apologize, Rein! I'll be happy to!" It was true, he would be happy to talk more about the plotlines of some of his favorite games to his friends, among actual cultural things from Japan, of course.

Reinhard smiled, not only because Subaru had agreed, but because he had called him by his nickname. He truly valued his friendship with Subaru, and was glad Subaru did as well.

Meanwhile, Subaru felt Beatrice's hand tighten around his ever so slightly. He knew that it was likely because she was jealous. He frequently told her stories of Japan, his life, experiences and many other things. So, in her mind, him telling other people those same stories would extinguish how special that was between them. He would have to reassure her later that there were some things that would remain between the two of them and only them.

Soon enough, they reached the bottom of the staircase. A small hallway connected it to the next room, and upon following it triggered some form of lighting system to activate. Upon exiting the small hallway and entering the chamber, various dim lights started activating around the room. It wasn't much, but they were able to see, so Julius stopped emitting his own source of light. It should be noted that the chamber they were in was big, but not overly spacious in the form circle. On the other side was a doorway, similar to the one they just emerged from, likely leading to the next room.

The group walked further into the chamber, which was completely empty other than some kind of rubble off to the side. Julius knelt down next to the rubble, with Reinhard hovering nearby. They both looked at the rubble, or rather what they determined to be something that had been destroyed. Julius, as he inspected it, saw something odd and picked it up. It seemed to be a cube, made of some material Julius didn't recognize.

"Reinhard, do you know what this might be?"

Reinhard looked over at it, examining it however he could. "I'm afraid not. I haven't seen anything like this before." Julius only hummed in response, looking at the cube before putting it away. He hoped that it could be useful later.

Not too far away, the other three gazed around the chamber. Subaru in particular rapidly moved his gaze to every place he could see, as if he were looking for something. He was pulled out of this when he felt a light pull on his hand, looking down to his contracted spirit.

"Is something wrong, I suppose?" Her face was mixed with concern and worry. It made him feel bad. He didn't want to worry her because of his own troubling experience.

"Ah, Beako, I'm okay," he told her, rather unconvincingly.

"If that's true, why do you keep looking around this place like you're about to be jumped, I suppose," she sighed, looking at him with a hint of frustration. "Honestly, when will you start completely relying on Betty? I'm here for you, in fact."

"As are we," Felix added, looking at Subaru with a determined look. "That's why you wanted us to be here, right? To help you? To look out for you? We're your friends, you can trust us."

Subaru took a deep breath, taking in their words, before his expression changed to one of content, "Yeah, got it."

Suddenly, the sound of stones falling against one another echoed throughout the chamber. Everyone's attention drew to the source of the sound, which presented itself along the opposite side of the chamber. The dim light helped little in illuminating the area, but from what minority they could see it seemed as though there was a small opening in the floor of the chamber.

Nobody removed their gazes, as small sounds continued to come from the gap. It wasn't long before something seemed to emerge from it, Subaru gulping at the sight. The creature, whatever it was, seemed to be as long as Subaru's legs. Its body stature was quite thin, other than the large sack trailing behind it. In addition, this creature possessed eight legs, four on each side. The legs were thin, protruding outward from its similarly thin body, with one joint protruding them downward and letting it anchor them to the ground.

It walked out of the hole quite fast, moving indiscriminately along the chamber floor. Everyone watched as the bizarre looking creature wandered around, not letting their guards down for even a moment. Eventually it stopped walking, everyone quietly continuing to warily watch.

That's when a loud, somewhat high-pitched shriek echoed throughout the chamber. It's mouth, now much more visible, expanded outward in a wide circle. Everyone seemed prepared to fight as the creature jumped up into the air, hidden wings coming out of its back, and prepared to dive onto Subaru's head, mouth first.

Just as it was about to land on Subaru's head, the creature hit an invisible barrier, letting it fall to the ground where it then proceeded to be immediately stabbed by Felix, ending its life. "Are you alright, Subaru-*kyun*?"

Subaru shakenly nodded, "Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." He then looked down to Beatrice, "And thanks for the save, Beako." She nodded to his thanks, gazing down with a serious look toward the being that nearly ended her contractor's life. Unknowingly to her, that same creature was what ended him in his previous loop.

More shrieks emanated from the hole, which was quickly followed by a vast amount of those same creatures. Everyone immediately began to fight off the attackers, as the creatures began to swarm them. The group huddled up, the Sword Saint and Spirit Knight taking the full brunt of the swarm.

Reinhard had little to no trouble taking care of the ones around him. His Divine Protections and skills serving their purposes in aiding him with this situation. Julius, similarly, did not have much trouble with the threat at hand. Just as Julius had sliced yet another one of the creatures, one quickly slipped past him and darted for him. The creature opened its mouth and quickly jumped onto his leg.

Julius immediately felt a sensation of great pain coming from his leg, quickly slicing the attached creature in half and letting its mouth fall to the floor. He knelt to the ground, unable to stand as more creatures came for him. Before they could make it, Reinhard came to his friend's aid, quickly dispatching the incoming creatures.

"Are you okay?" Reinhard asked his friend, keeping his eyes ahead of him.

"I'll be fine," Julius responded, clenching his leg. He looked ahead at the onslaught of continuously coming creatures, "There's just no end to them."

"Reinhard, strike the roof!" Subaru shouted from the back, using his whip to attack some of the creatures that slipped by as Beatrice and Felix did the same.

Reinhard looked at the hole, then at the roof, immediately understanding what Subaru's plan was. Quickly, Reinhard took his sword and slashed at the roof above the hole. The result of the impact caused the rock to break and crumble, falling down and covering the ground by the hole. Fortunately, the chamber walls stabilized and the roof ceased crumbling before the entire chamber could be completely filled with rock.

The group had to reconvene with one another after killing off any remaining stragglers, with Felix immediately rushing to Julius to heal his wounded leg. Subaru looked at the bodies of the creatures, a sudden shiver enveloping him as he imagined their deadliness. Spiders with wings were now on his nightmare list.

Reinhard picked up one of the creature's heads, examining it, "I have not seen or heard of anything like these before..." he trailed off, looking at it thoughtfully. "There are no teeth here, so how did it injure Julius, Felix?"

"Some kind of acid spit," Felix answered as he examined and healed the wound. "It wasn't attached to him for long, but it already got through a lot of flesh. If the first one ever attached itself to Subaru-*kyun*'s face, he would have died instantly." Subaru shuddered at the prospect. At least he knew what happened in the last loop.

Julius winced as Felix healed his wound, silently ashamed at his uselessness and failure to keep himself unharmed. Subaru looked over to Beatrice, "Beako, do you know what these might be?"

Beatrice looked up at him to answer, "I do not, I suppose. Though I can hypothesize that these creatures are very old and ancient, in fact. Not even mother knew about this place, and she did not have any such information about those creatures in any of her books."

"I see," he responded. "But there's no way they should have been here originally, right?"

"I believe you're correct," Reinhard moved closer to them as he spoke. "I believe that these creatures came to inhabit this place some time ago and built some kind of nest within the hole they emerged from. They likely attacked because we distributed them." As everyone registered his words, they recognized they made sense. "Subaru, you stated before that this was a combat trial, correct?"

Subaru nodded, not expecting the sudden change of topics. Reinhard thought to himself for a quick moment, before speaking again.

"That would explain the pile of rocks we found earlier. Perhaps that was what we were initially supposed to go against, but those creatures swarmed and destroyed it."

Julius made sense of those words, wincing again as Felix finished up healing his leg. "That would explain the strange object we found next to it," as he spoke, he pulled out the cube he had taken before.

He threw it to Subaru, who he trusted to know what to do with it. The part of Subaru's mind that resembled his NEET days kicked in, quickly deducting what to do with it. If Reinhard and Julius found it next to the boss they were supposed to fight, then that could only mean it was a boss drop! The key for the next room!

Walking over to the large door, he found an empty slot in which the cube could perfectly slide into. He satisfyingly slid it into the slot, locking it into place and stepping a safe distance back as the door began to shake. Soon, it opened inward to reveal the next room.

"Well, it wasn't the trial we were supposed to have but it was definitely a combat trial," Subaru awkwardly laughed to himself. He then looked at Julius, "Also, look who needed healing after all! Ha! Not me!"

Julius only half-heartedly glared at Subaru's teasing, not at all offended by the comment. He swore he saw Reinhard smile at the comment, though, and Felix even snickered while Beatrice had a hint of pride on her face.

They waited until Felix finished healing Julius' wound before they progressed, which didn't take long. Having the best healer in Lugnica with them was definitely helpful. Subaru was genuinely happy that he asked them to come. He really should start relying on other people more, he thought.

Reinhard helped Julius to his feet. They would have discussed whether they'd be sending any reconnaissance groups out to investigate when they were finished, but they weren't at all eager to start discussing that after what had just happened. Those creatures, despite being a new discovery, were exceedingly dangerous and could cause severe harm to any normal person and most knights, especially if they were to swarm again. Instead, they only progressed into the next room to face their next trial.

As Julius walked, he commented that he still felt a stinging sensation and pain. Once they got into the room, Felix insisted that he look over his wound again, with Reinhard hovering nearby to watch over them. Subaru, followed by Beatrice, investigated the room's contents.

It seemed as though this room was smaller than the last, only filled with whatever was necessary for the trial and the same door at the other side. The room had a variety of different, complex buttons that seemed to connect to little holes on the wall that emitted light. Subaru quickly deduced that this was some sort of puzzle, one in which the one solving needed to turn all of the lights on. However, the amount of lights and buttons present was nothing to gloss over. He put a hand to his chin in thought as Beatrice continued to stare at his face, her mouth slightly agape.

Meanwhile, the other three knights were caught up in their own conversation. "Does it still sting?"

"A bit, but I am-"

"Shut it, let me finish healing you," Felix insisted, making Julius stop talking and begrudgingly let his friend examine his leg again.

Silence engulfed them for a few moments, before Julius looked to his red haired friend, who he noticed had an indecisive look on his face, and spoke, "Are you alright, Reinhard?"

He snapped out of his own thoughts, looking at Julius with a contemplative look. "I'm sorry for raising concern, it's just..."

Julius kept looking at him as he trailed off, "Just what?"

"I have an odd feeling, is all," Reinhard stated, going back into his own thoughts.

"Is it about the next trial? Or what the Great Sage has hidden here?" Julius asked, still concerned for his friend.

Reinhard shook his head, "It's not about this place. It's more about me."

This time, Felix looked at his friend and asked, "What's wrong? I'm sure there's nothing wrong with you, nyan."

Reinhard looked back to them, shaking his head with a still highly contemplative look on his face, "My Divine Protection of Sensory Awareness seems to be failing me. If it had been working, I am sure I would have detected those creatures before they had a chance to completely show themselves."

This new information alarmed the other two knights. Julius quickly asked, "Do you think it's this place?"

Reinhard shook his head again, "I do not know. I have not heard of anyone or anything that is able to completely neutralize a Divine Protection."

The other two hummed. Felix went back to finishing up with his wound as Julius responded, "Then we should keep our guards up."

Reinhard nodded, agreeing with an "indeed" as he found himself lost within his own mind again. Felix removed his hands from Julius' leg, looking at him as he asked, "How is it now?"

Julius moved his limb around, feeling it out, before smiling at his friend, "Much better now, thank you."

Felix smiled back, the both of them getting to their feet. Felix then looked at Reinhard, asking him a question he had on his mind, "Say, why not just blow open every door here?"

Reinhard looked over at him, once again snapping himself out of his thoughts, "I fear that in doing that, I may make the surrounding terrain unstable and cause a collapse."

"Ah, that's fair," Felix was content with the answer he received.

"And I noticed that Subaru was disappointed before when I opened the first door, so I did not want to upset him again."

Felix softly smiled, slightly shaking his head, "Good guy Reinhard." He paused, taking in time to form his next statement, raising a finger to his chin in mock thought, "In any case, how do you think this next trial is going to be, nyah?"

"This is supposed to be a trial revolving around a puzzle, per Subaru's words." Reinhard responded.

"I do wonder what kind of puzzle it could be. Knowing the Great Sage, it must definitely be a difficult one to pass," Julius theorized, looking at Reinhard.

"Likely," the Sword Saint answered back. "However, I am sure if we all work together to solve it, we can."

"Aha!"

Reinhard was interrupted by a loud exclamation of joy from the only missing knight of their group. The three turned their heads toward their friend, who was standing in front of an opening door doing one of his signature Subaru poses.

Subaru turned back to them, the door now all the way open, a smug smile on his face. Julius was the first to speak, "How did you-"

Julius was admittedly lost for words, unsure as to how his friend solved the trial's puzzle, opened the door so quickly and without them realizing. "I just made all of those dots on the wall light up! I used to be an expert in these kinds of puzzles back in the day!" At least Subaru's time playing all of those puzzle games finally paid off.

Felix looked at him with a minor sweat drop, "Your deductive ability is truly amazing, Subaru-*kyun*."

Beatrice puffed up, a similarly pridefully look on her face. "As expected of Betty's Subaru, I suppose!"

After that minor surprise, they all wasted little time in proceeding to the final room. Inside there were things that none of them had thought to find. The room, which was

quite small in comparison to the others, looked to be filled with various objects, books and something more noticeable at the far end of the room that looked out of place.

Reinhard and Felix took to examining the thing at the room's center, while Julius went to look at some of the other objects scattered around the room on his own. Subaru had ended up following Beatrice, who had almost been pulled over to a large stack of books. Said books, which had probably been collecting dust for centuries, stood out by themselves on their own side of the room. Beatrice picked up the first book she laid eyes on, examining the cover for a brief moment before opening it to the first page. After skimming its contents, she let out a frustrated grumble, "Betty can't read this."

At that comment, Subaru peaked over her shoulder at the book's contents. He recognized the language immediately, quickly leaning in next to his spirit to read more, much to her surprise.

"Can you read this, Subaru?" She asked, wonder filling her butterfly eyes as she shifted her gaze to him.

He glanced away from the book, laying his eyes on her to answer her question, "Yeah, I can. This is the language of my homeland."

Beatrice made a squeak of amazement as she looked back at the book, "What is it then, I suppose."

Subaru similarly looked back at the book, "It's signed by the Great Sage, Flugel." He turned a page, reading more, "It's less of a book and more of a journal, or diary." He kept turning pages, skimming as much of its contents as he could. "There's a lot of information in here about some of the things in here."

Beatrice could only keep her amazed expression as she watched her contractor read through the book. It was true that Subaru had been teaching her some of his language, which included writing and reading, but she wasn't at a high enough level to understand everything yet. At most, she could effortlessly write out Subaru's name, which she memorized after he taught it to her. This only made her want to learn it even more.

"Oi, Reinhard, Felix, I'd step away from that thing if I were you! It's some kind of seal, or something!"

Upon Subaru's shout, the two cautiously backed away. Felix jumped away exceptionally more than Reinhard, probably in more of a panic since he had been getting a bit touchy with it. After the warning, the two knights decided to walk over to the contracted pair.

"How'd you know it was a seal, nyan?" Felix asked, peaking over Subaru's shoulder.

"It's written in this," he lifted up the book in his hands in reference to it. "Actually, there's a few pages dedicated to it."

"What do they say?" Reinhard asked, similarly peaking over Subaru's other shoulder. Beatrice stayed at Subaru's side, with her own view of the book.

"Hmm.." He hummed, reading a little more. "It's apparently called the 'Seal of Eternity.'"

"That's not ominous at all," Felix commented, continuing to look at the book as Subaru read.

"It was supposed to be used on the Witch of Envy, initially. But since the seal has a pretty heavy drawback for the one activating it, the Great Sage left it here and built the chambers to store and protect it. It's also just that little stone tablet in the center, with the little symbol on it, not that entire structure."

"It must be quite powerful, then. Although a small stone tablet is quite an odd form for an entire seal," Reinhard added, glancing back at the seal. It was something made to contain the Witch of Envy, and even when it wasn't being currently used had been

heavily protected. Information of this shouldn't spread, he would do his best to make sure of that. Though, there were still a few more questions on his mind. He turned back to Subaru, "What drawback prevented it from being used?"

Subaru looked back through the pages, once again finding the section, "Apparently the seal acts as its own pocket dimension, with its own rules that transcend beyond this world's own space-time continuum. The drawback is that it can only be activated through direct contact, and if you wanted to seal someone really powerful in there then you'd have to be in direct contact with them as well. Basically you're sealing yourself in with them, unless the person you want to seal wants to willingly put themselves in there. Guess nobody wanted to play the self-sacrificial hero, not that the Witch of Envy would have let them anyway."

Subaru mused in his mind as to whether Satella would have sealed herself in there, considering she let them seal her in the current one. He couldn't help but think she wouldn't, just because she would be unable to interact with this world at all. If that happened, she wouldn't have been able to bring him here, after all.

"... I'm lost." Felix deadpanned at his explanation.

"Hey, don't look at me, I'm just reading from the book here."

They were interrupted by a shout, "Identify yourself!"

The four of them quickly pulled their attention to Julius, who stood at the center of the room facing the doorway, a hand on his sword. They all went to support him, Reinhard taking a spot next to Julius, with Subaru, Beatrice and Felix behind them. They all looked through the open doorway at an approaching figure.

As it came closer, their details became more noticeable. A girl, perhaps only a bit shorter than him, entered the room. Her long, silver hair seemed to reflect what little light presented itself in the room, with an indifferent look plastered on her face. The only other thing that seemed out of place on her face was the small smile she possessed. She wore only a single piece of cloth, no shoes or other notable pieces of clothing present at all.

"You..." Beatrice uttered under her breath, instinctively getting in front of her contractor to protect him.

"Please, identify yourself." Reinhard asked steely, yet with a hint of courtesy. Though this woman possessed features similar to a lost, homeless civilian. He was reluctant to think that someone, even a lost child, would have wandered all the way into a place such as this. The fact that she was here at all was... odd.

She didn't answer immediately, instead stopping in her advance and looking over at the group of five. When she did speak, however, it was not the words they would have liked to hear. "The three knights shouldn't be here. They are on their carriage, on their way back to the capital, having left after the second chamber was unlocked."

"What are y-"

Before Julius had time to finish his question, he, along with Reinhard and Felix, suddenly disappeared. Subaru's breath started to become shaky, as his eyes widened in shock over what he'd just witnessed.

Her gaze then became fixated on him. "Natsuki Subaru, we meet at last," she spoke again, her voice gentle and soft, yet Subaru could sense it wasn't quite right. He looked at her, his body now shaking in conjunction to his breath. He was afraid. This girl had just vanquished the Sword Saint, and she had just addressed him.

When the girl proceeded to move forward, Beatrice took her own step forward in an act of defiance, "If you think I'll let you near Betty's Subaru, you are mistaken, in fact!"

"Oh?" The girl spoke, as if she were questioning Beatrice's statement.

"Minya!" Beatrice yelled out. Subaru recognized the attack immediately as the crystallized stakes appeared in the air. Almost as soon as they appeared, they rushed forward and toward the girl before they all hit her, penetrating through her body, seemingly ending her life in a swift moment.

Beatrice turned to him. Subaru noted that she looked stressed, almost nervous. "B-Beako, what was that?"

"The Witch of Vainglory, Pandora," She quickly answered. She opened her mouth to say more, but before either Subaru or Beatrice had time to realize it, the girl had reappeared above them, laying a hand on the top of Beatrice's head. It was done as if it were effortless, Beatrice's body sliding into the ground smoothly. Beatrice struggled, finding it exceedingly difficult to get out of her pseudo-prison. The girl lifted her hand from the spirit's head, looking back at Subaru with the same indifferent look she had when she first appeared.

"Now, since there are no more distractions," she straightened her posture, once again proceeding to approach him. "We have a lot to discuss, Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru himself had unconsciously begun to step backward in pace to her advances. Eventually his back had pressed up against something, preventing him from stepping back anymore. She kept moving forward, though, until she got considerably close enough to him.

"What-... What do you want from me?" He was able to stutter out, looking at her with a vast amount of different emotions.

She hummed, her gaze moving from his head, down his body to his feet, then back up to his head. "I find it hard to imagine someone of your stature being able to defeat two of my archbishops."

All Subaru could do was mouth the start of a word or two, unable to find the right things to say. He was at a loss as to what this girl wanted and what he could do. At this point, he was fearing he'd die at any given moment. This girl was powerful, there was no doubt. Beatrice also said she was a Witch and, from what he saw, she was able to overwrite reality with mere words and physical contact. Not only that, but she said 'her archbishops,' as if she were the one in charge. It all, admittedly, made him scared. Scared of what could happen to him, and even the people close to him, if he didn't comply with whatever she wanted.

"That's why I believe there is something special about you, especially with that overwhelming scent you have. So, I must ask this of you," her voice remained soft, unchanging in its tone.

"What- What do you want to ask?" He murmured, warily.

"Come with me," she stated, surprising him. He truly did not expect her to state such a thing. "If you come with me, I can help you realize things you've only dreamed of. You can live up to your full potential."

As Subaru realized her words, he looked behind her at Beatrice. She had stopped struggling to look at him, her face pleading with him to decline, to not leave her. Subaru looked back at the Witch, "And what if I refuse?"

She hummed again, as if she were in thought, "If you were to refuse, then I would be forced to take drastic measures."

It was a simple statement, but Subaru knew what it meant. It was either join her, or she would kill Beatrice and whoever else she needed to in order to get him to join her. Subaru immediately considered offing himself, but a thought crossed his mind. If this

girl, this Witch, was capable of overwriting reality... then couldn't she just prevent him from dying?

In all honesty, it was a sick thought. One that he couldn't be sure was true or not, but was too scared to try. If he did try and she could stop his death, he would have subsequently doomed everyone. For once, he considered himself completely out of options. It was either join her, or everyone he cares about will die. Even if he did join her, he wouldn't even be completely sure if his friends would stay safe forever. He didn't want to join her and end up betraying everyone he ever cared about, possibly hurting them if his mind ever became too unsalvageable. He loathed that possibility. If Subaru ever took one overall lesson from this world, it would be that, even in the happiest of moments, life can flip on its nose in a heartbeat and turn it into a shitshow. That's even what was happening to him now.

As he moved his hands along the surface his back was pressed against, they touched something. That was when Subaru realized where he was, what his hand was currently grabbing ahold of. Another option had presented itself to him, but one he wasn't sure he was ready to take.

"So, what is your decision?" She held out her hand. Subaru would either take it, or refuse it.

"I-..."

He thought about everyone in this world. All whom he had met, cherished, shared bonds with. They all crossed his mind. He thought of Emilia and her happy smile, with her winning the royal selection. He thought of the omi twins, happy together as sisters. He thought of Beatrice, in the outside world, happy. Otto, Garfiel, Frederica, Petra, all of them living happy lives, peacefully. It would be worth it, if they were able to live that life, even if it was without him.

He made his decision.

"I'll join you," his voice filled with a newfound set of confidence as he looked into her eyes. Their normally mean glare was filled with a fiery determination as he took her hand.

Her smile never ceased, seemingly glad he accepted her offer. "I am glad you came to the correct decision, Natsuki Suabru."

After those words, he developed a shaky, yet confident smile, "You bet I did." He held up his hand, a small yet heavy stone tablet with a symbol at its center occupying his palm. It began to glow brightly as he clenched it tighter in his hand. Looking at the Witch in front of him, he hardened his gaze, "You and I are gonna take some time away."

When Beatrice saw what was in his hand, she began to struggle again. She desperately tried to get out, to get to her Subaru, to stop him. "S-Subaru, no!"

"I'm sorry, everyone."

With that, as the bright white light started emitting from the seal, she tried to pull out of his grasp, her mouth starting to open in an attempt to speak, but it was too late. The light flashed across the entire room.

When the light died down, the sound of stone hitting the ground echoed throughout the room, before it settled. Beatrice looked ahead of her, seeing nothing but the room, with the stone tablet flat on the ground where her contractor and the Witch once stood.

As moments passed, she finally freed herself. She shakily wobbled over to the seal, her legs giving out on themselves when she finally made it there. She sat on her knees, bending her back as she reached forward with her hands, grabbing the seal in her tiny grasp. She turned it over, looking at the glowing symbol on its surface. She slowly

brought it to her chest, pressing it against herself as small droplets spilled from her eyes, staining her clothes. Small cries echoed in the room, as she held it tighter to her chest, silently whispering her contractor's name.

***Chapter 3*: Don't Let Me Go**

Chapter 3: Don't Let Me Go

He didn't quite know what was happening around him. Suddenly being able to physically feel things again threw his mind more out of loop than it already was. It was all suddenly so jarring, uncomfortable, painful even.

His senses were mostly completely disoriented, too. He couldn't hear anything besides a faint ringing in his ears. His mouth was dry, as if he had been laying out in the sun all day, with nothing to drink, in the middle of a desert. When he opened his eyes, all he saw was a blur. Upon closing them, the fatigue he felt became more apparent to the point he hardly wanted to open his eyes again. In fact, his mind threatened to fall asleep before he could even think about it. The only thing that kept him awake was the constant flow of thoughts cycling through his brain.

He was also cold, very cold, throughout various parts of his body. Though, he also felt a comfortable warmth. That warmth was the only thing keeping him from shivering. It took him some time to process what he was feeling, since his body had been quite uncooperative regarding his own senses.

As his body seemed to adjust, his mind did as well, for the most part. He realized that his arms and legs were wrapped around something, or rather someone, this entire time. Similarly, a separate pair of arms and legs were wrapped around him as well. Just when he thought that was it, he could just barely feel soft breaths on his neck. He seemed to be holding someone close to him; that was the source of his comfortable warmth.

He attempted to wrap his head around it. Currently, his memories were hazy and overall it was hard to recall anything prior to this situation. He could hardly ponder on anything, though he supposed that was a consequence of being overly exhausted. All he could gather, or rather all he knew, was that this position was comfortable. It felt natural and subconsciously he didn't want to move, he didn't want it to change.

In an act of pure willpower, he was able to open his eyes again in an attempt to see what was in front of him. The blur that had been there previously was still obscuring his vision, for the most part, however it had cleared up just enough to get a general outline of some things.

What he first registered was the long, straight platinum hair that belonged to the person he was currently sharing an embrace with. It went down the girl's back almost gorgeously. She didn't seem to be wearing much, other than a single piece of clothing. Her face was tucked next to his head, so he was unable to see it at all, not that he would have been able to see anything special anyway with his limited vision.

For a small window, nothing of notice stood out to him. But just as he was about to let the overwhelming urge to sleep take him over, movement caught his eye. A small girl with a pale face, blonde hair that seemed to extend out to both sides and particularly odd clothing that he couldn't exactly make out any details of. The moving figure got closer to him, right up into his face. Her eyes, he could barely make out, were a sky-blue, housing something in the middle of them; a shape, one he couldn't determine just yet. He could barely register the outline of droplets coming from her eyes. Her mouth moved in a singular, looped motion, as if she were repeating something over and over again.

He felt small hands on his body, mainly his stomach area, trying to rattle or push him into moving out of the embrace he was currently in. He couldn't even if he tried, his body wouldn't listen, nor did he really want to leave the comfortable position he was already in. The hands moved to various places along his stomach, trying to wedge themselves between him and the girl he held. At one point, the hands tried pulling them apart, but they never split.

Despite his petty attempt at fighting back, his eyes closed almost as if they had their own will. His thoughts became nullified, his mind now barely registering anything around him. The ringing and feelings fading away as the threat of sleep overrode him. He was asleep before he even knew what to think.

When he awoke, the first thing he did was try to open his eyes. However, the sudden light that invaded his retinas made him close them again. He would have rubbed them with one of his hands, but it seemed as though they were both being weighed down by two separate things. It took him a little while, but eventually he eased his eyes into adjusting to the light.

He sat up, a feeling of calm washing over him as he began gazing around at his surroundings. He was on a bed, a comfortable one at that, and his clothes were changed. He wore different undergarments and shorts, though he was missing a shirt. The room he was in was quite big, spacious even, though unfamiliar to him.

The feeling of calm suddenly vanished, replaced with a subtle yet steadily rising anxiety. His breath started to become more rapid as he felt his chest begin to hurt. An intense feeling, not foreign to him, overwhelmed him: the feeling as if he were about to die. He looked around the room in a desperate hurry, but once he looked down to his left he immediately calmed down once more.

His left hand was tightly intertwined with another. A pale hand, attached to the one girl he had spent an eternity with; the same girl that he shared everything with. The girl that made his heart beat faster, even now, because of the love they developed. "Pan... dora..." he hoarsely breathed out.

She lay on the bed next to him, asleep just as he once was, though unlike him her attire didn't change. Despite her somewhat messy hair and worn-down stature, she looked content. He smiled; he was happy she was alright.

Feeling his right arm move, he looked down at it. His eyes went wide, "Beako..." he uttered, almost painfully. Not only was his throat still dry, but he hadn't spoken in... well, an eternity.

He only looked at her, not daring to disturb her. She seemed to be asleep, yet she fidgeted and clung to his arm like he'd disappear the moment she let go. When he looked at her face, and at the damp bed sheet under her head, he knew that she had been crying. It made him feel horrible; he never wanted to see his Beako sad, let alone cry.

He kept looking at her, almost as if he were in disbelief. He still felt the endless passage of years within his mind, the memories of his time there coming back to him more and more. He once thought, once believed, that he'd never be able to see her again. He had come to terms and accepted that fate, but now, being in front of her again, he almost couldn't believe it.

However the more he looked at her, the more he realized that something was off. Her features, albeit similar, were not the same. The blonde hair that she possessed was messy and, while still dominated by that color, was now tainted with different colored streaks in various areas. The streaks were thin, as if they were each only a single strand of hair, but there was a great many of them. On the top of her head, under her hair, he noticed that there were black spots. Unnatural, horror inducing spots. Then there was her outfit; while it bore many similarities to her usual one, this one's color scheme screamed 'dark' in Subaru's mind. It was mostly black, with occasional white fillings and red seams.

Disbelief and almost joy upon seeing her ended up turning into concern and fear. This was his Beako, there was no doubt. He could feel their contract... it was faint, assuming because he was trapped in the seal for so long, but it was there. But what happened to her? What the hell happened to his Beako?

He must have accidentally jolted his hand during his mental freak out, because she started to stir. He watched silently as his contracted spirit woke herself up. She rubbed her eyes and shook her head once or twice to try and wake herself up some more. Soon enough, she found herself looking straight up and into Subaru's eyes.

The two silently stared at one another for a few moments. Subaru especially was unsure of what to say, or do. Luckily, he didn't have to think about it for much longer, as the little spirit practically pounced on him. Her face dug into his neck, her small arms wrapped around his back as she wailed, "Subaru! Subaru! Subaru! Subaru!"

As if it were instinctual he put his now free right hand behind her back and began to rub it, trying to soothe her. He consistently kept that action going, even when her yells turned into sniffles. He only stopped when she picked her head out from his neck and looked into his eyes with her tearful ones. He moved his hand from his back to her cheek, wiping some of the tears away as he smiled at her. "It's okay... Beako. I'm... here," he told her in a hoarse voice, not failing to keep his warm smile.

Her face only seemed to scrunch up, more tears beginning to develop as she plunged her face into his chest and cried into it. "D-Don't leave Betty like that ever a-again!"

He didn't respond to her words, just going back to rubbing her back. They stayed in that position for a good while, with Beatrice finally letting the dam break once more as she cried into his chest. Eventually, after crying for a long while, she seemed to go back to her sniffles, taking her head out of his chest and wiping her own tears. Beatrice finally seemed a little more composed, taking his hand into her small one and squeezing it. He squeezed back, albeit not as hard, to let her know that he was there for her.

When he saw her mouth move, but only heard faint mumbling, he slightly tilted his head, attempting to speak in his hoarse voice, "What... did you... say, Beako? What's... wrong?"

Suddenly, she glared at him, her mouth turning into something like a snarl as she raised her free hand and delivered a hard slap to his cheek. The red mark came in quite fast, and it stung, but he didn't dare make any remark about it.

"What's wrong.... What's wrong?!" She practically screamed at him, with tears threatening to come back out. "You cannot possibly comprehend how painful this was for Betty! How much Betty suffered without you, without anyone! Betty..." she trailed off, her voice becoming shyer. "Betty needed you and you left her... why? Why did you leave Betty?"

"I-..." truthfully, he did not know what to say. He thought that, even without him, they would be happy. That they would all be able to live their best lives possible, just as long as they survived. But when Beatrice told him that she'd suffered instead, his heart broke into two, then into four, and kept going until it shattered into billions of pieces. Had he truly made the wrong decision? His eyes took a small glance to the girl laying at his side. Had Pandora been right when she told him they wouldn't be happy if he wasn't there?

Guilt consumed him. Seeing Beatrice cry, her sad face, her somewhat hoarse and tired voice hurt him to no end. In his mind, he thought she deserved to know what he was thinking. She deserved to know the honest reason as to why he had left. After the pain he caused her, it was the least he could do.

He looked at her, taking a breath before he began trying to explain himself, "Beako, I..." His voice was still hoarse, and it hurt to speak, but he forced himself to give her the clearest explanation he could muster. "I thought that, even if I wasn't around, you all... would be able to live your lives... to the fullest. To be happy... attaining your goals. I never thought... of myself to be that big of an influence in that... so, I didn't see an issue in-"

Her reaction was immediate. Another slap echoed within the room they were in, Subaru, once again, not daring to say anything about it. She kept glaring at him, more

tears forming in her eyes, "IDIOT!" She screamed at him, balling her tiny hands into fists and beginning to repeatedly hit his stomach area. "Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot!"

He slightly averted his gaze as he let her vent out her anger and frustration. He did not know what to say, nor did he know how to act or what to think. He felt as if she wasn't done expressing her feelings yet, too, so he wouldn't stop her. He had no right to do that, after all.

"How- How do you not understand, I suppose!" She looked back up at him, in which he looked back at her. Her expression clearly displayed her sadness, anger and overall pain, which he absolutely detested. She never should have had that kind of expression again while she was contracted under him. "We all care about you! You-You saved Betty! Without you Betty has no life! The others felt the same way too, in fact! How do you not get that!"

Subaru looked at her, stunned and in mild shock. His face quickly became crestfallen, his gaze shifting downward to avoid hers. He really was an idiot, wasn't he? After all of this time, being told that he meant something, how important he was, how much he was cared about... he still didn't bother to listen. Giving himself up for the supposed 'betterment' of everyone else was probably the worst decision he could have made, wasn't it?

"I-I'm so, so sorry... Beako," he wrapped his free arm around her, pulling her close to him, much to her shock. "I'm so sorry... I didn't realize sooner."

Beatrice seemed stunned for a small moment, before her tiny arms went behind his back to return the hug he gave to her. "Betty... accepts your apology, I suppose. You're back now, after all, and Betty is sure you won't make the same mistake again," she pulled herself from the hug, intently staring into his eyes, "right?"

He let out a hearty chuckle, a small smile actually coming onto his face, "Yes, Beako. I promise, I'll never... make a stupid mistake like that again." His smile disappeared almost as soon as it appeared, coughing a bit after his words. When he stopped coughing, a sigh escaped from his lips, "Man, the others... must be so mad at me... too."

His expression perked up, like he'd realized something important. "Beako," he started, "where... is everyone? Emilia-*tan*, Rem, Ram, even... Roswaal, where are they? Are they... alright?"

She let out a sigh, looking at him with an expression he couldn't quite discern. "There are a lot of things we must discuss, I suppose."

He looked at her a bit hesitantly, as his mind began to race with worry and concern. What did she mean? What was she implying? Is everyone okay?

"I suppose I should begin with you and your condition," she started, looking at him. She also seemed to reluctantly glance down to Pandora, but she quickly readjusted her gaze up to him again. "You have been missing, inside the seal, for over a year, at least, I suppose. However I am unsure of the exact amount of time."

His eyes widened, admittedly shocked and surprised. He did not expect such little time to have passed, after having been in a prison for what felt like an eternity. He opened his mouth to ask that very question, "But... it felt like I was in there for... well, forever-

"Betty will get to that, I suppose." She interjected quickly, surprising him. "Speaking of that seal, it had a great impact on your mental state. All natural, not done by any magical means, I suppose. To your mind and hers, you spent millions upon millions of years inside of the seal. This, naturally, caused your minds to break, shatter and ultimately be driven mad, insane if you will. It took Betty what felt like ages to rid the insanity of your minds, I suppose. In addition, you both suffered from malnutrition, dehydration, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, and more. It took Betty a long time to bring

you both back to good health, I suppose." She shuddered, "Betty does not desire to go through that grueling process again."

Now that she mentioned it, his mind felt incredibly clear. It was almost unusual to him. He had gotten used to his mind's broken state whilst trapped in the seal, so suddenly being able to think so clearly again was almost surreal upon realizing it. He didn't quite understand why he hadn't realized before now, but he considered it a possible combination between actually being sane again and the whole situation around him now. Additionally, his body was pretty worse for wear. He definitely felt weaker, and he looked to have lost a lot of muscle. He also seemed pretty thin, now, probably a direct result of his bad health.

Either way, he ended up looking at his contracted spirit with a questioning look. "Wait, you said you helped... Pandora?" He looked between the two girls, Pandora still being asleep with their hands intertwined. "I'm... I'm really thankful that you did, but... that seems really... unusual."

At his words, she sighed. "If I could have left her in that prison alone, I would have, I suppose. If I could tear her away from you right now, I would." She looked down at the sleeping platinum haired girl, glaring at her. "However, whatever happened to the both of you in there, whatever you two did, you formed... a bond. Something Betty is unable to separate or intervene."

"What do you... mean?" Subaru asked her, unsure of what she meant at all.

Beatrice let out a slight groan, extending an arm in reference to Subaru and Pandora's intertwined hands. "Why do you think you two are still physically connected, I suppose. The moment I was finally able to separate you two, both of you..." she trailed off, fidgeting a little bit, seemingly uncomfortable with what she was about to talk about. "The two of you began to shake and convulse, among other things..." she trailed off again, looking away from him a bit. "It really scared Betty. Betty didn't know what to do, but... the moment you two touched your hands together you became calm." She looked back up at him, her expression indiscernible. "Your hands have been together for days, in fact. Whatever bond you two formed, it became a necessity. One where you cannot stand to be separated from the other, even on a subconscious level."

Subaru's eyes went wide as his gaze shifted away from Beatrice and down to Pandora. She seemed to sleep peacefully, her breath steadily rising and falling. He'd be lying if he said that he didn't think she was cute like that.

Though, when he thought about what Beatrice said, the more it resembled an anxiety attack of some kind. He realized that was what had happened earlier when he woke up; he was starting to have an anxiety attack. But, when he saw Pandora and acknowledged that their hands were together, he relaxed.

His gaze shifted away from Pandora, directing itself to no place in particular as he lost himself in thought. "I suppose Betty should tell you of what occurred in your absence?" She suddenly questioned him, making him lift his eyes to her. She had an indifferent expression as she looked at him, awaiting his response.

He looked at her, unsure as to what he should say in reply. He was still in a bit of shock from the previous things he was told, after all. It didn't take the spirit long to speak again, once she realized he had nothing to say yet.

"Betty is sure you noticed that... her physical form is not like it once was," she dejectedly said. She used her arms to gesture to her body. Her expression showed her sadness; it showed how ashamed she was to present herself to him as she was. "Betty's skin, her hair... even her eyes," she looked at him, letting him look at the irregular shapes and colors present in her eyes that he hadn't noticed before. Aside from small, unusual shapes next to her butterflies, he noticed a thin orange ring around her iris. Then, around the orange ring, was a similarly thin red ring. Finally, the sclera part of the eye had what looked to be thin, small black veins in them. They were hardly

noticeable unless someone looked closely. Noticing all of these irregular features on her made his mind race.

Subaru felt like he wanted to cry. She was so, so different. She looked like she was in pain, too. He gently put his hand on her cheek, keeping his gaze on her. "Beako... What did you do... to yourself," he muttered in his still hoarsely sounding voice, barely loud enough for her to hear.

"I-... It's-" she stuttered, tears once again attempting to form in her eyes. "They're-... consequences of my actions, I suppose."

She averted her gaze as he kept his focused on her. He was more unsure of what to say than before. He was, admittedly, afraid of these implications. Not afraid for himself, no, he was scared for her. Concerned for her; desperate that she'd be okay. "What... What do you mean, Beako?"

She tried to form words, but each time she tried she started in a stutter. Subaru could tell she was afraid, that she was unsure of what he'd say or what he'd think of her. He wanted to reassure her, he wanted to help her, but he had no idea how. After everything she'd been through because of him, he doubted that his reassurance would help much anyway.

Luckily, or unluckily depending on how either of them wanted to think about it, a loud groan interrupted them. Immediately, the two turned to face the source of the noise while, at the same time, Subaru felt a slight pull on his left hand. The platinum haired girl was waking up, her eyes slowly beginning to blink open. It wasn't long before her blinking mostly ceased, with Subaru finally able to look into her deep blue eyes that resembled the sea once again.

Similar to Subaru when he first awoke, she looked straight up at the ceiling. Even after a few moments, she kept staring up into the ceiling. At first, Subaru and Beatrice only assumed that she was taking in her new surroundings. Like Subaru, she had also been trapped in the black abyss of the seal, so seeing something new may perhaps be a tad jarring at first. However, when her eyes suddenly started going wide, her breathing becoming more and more rapid, they knew something else was happening.

Subaru immediately put his face over hers so she could see him, immediately realizing her condition. He had positioned himself a little too close to her face, at least closer than Beatrice was comfortable looking at. He used his thumb to gently caress her hand, so she'd notice they were together, as he began to speak, "Pandora, it's okay... it's okay."

Her eyes seemed to relax; as did her body, which had begun to stiffen. Her breath leveled itself out, reducing itself to only small intakes and outtakes of air. Her eyes moved to look into his, almost as if she were mesmerized by them. Subaru was in a similar predicament as he looked into hers.

The two stayed like that for a while, caught within the trap that was the other's eyes. It was almost as if anything and everything around them didn't matter, as if they were back in the void, as if they'd fallen in love all over again.

Her free hand made its way to Subaru's cheek and put itself against it. She could physically feel him, for the first time. For the first time she felt his hand against hers, with its rough feeling yet soft and caring touch. She could feel his cheek and how smooth it was against her hand. It made her smile, something which he returned with a full heart.

Her mouth went slightly agape, her breath lightly hitting his face as she started to speak, "Suba...ru..."

She moved her hand from his cheek to the back of his head, lightly pulling his head down to her. She put her forehead against his, closing her eyes as she simply enjoyed him being there with her.

"Thought... you were gone," she muttered, slightly surprising Subaru. Though, his smile didn't falter as he similarly enjoyed being there with her in their moment. "Stay... with me."

Beatrice looked on at the two of them, unsure as to what she should say or think. That seemed to be quite common for her now. It was all so bizarre for her, truthfully. After finally getting her contractor back, after suffering for so long trying to do it, she sees his abnormal bond for the Witch of Vainglory. This particular Witch was someone she never thought was capable of change, but her eyes did not deceive her. Not only did Subaru himself change, which itself became evident by his actions and the way he spoke, but the Witch of Vainglory did as well.

She continued to watch the two of them silently. They kept their heads together, eyes closed with smiles on their faces as if it were natural to them. It was as if nothing around them mattered anymore. Even though she really did not want to believe it, what she was witnessing here was pure, authentic love. At first, she considered that the Witch was merely faking it, but there was simply no possible way she would go this far. With the consideration of their subconscious reactions to being separated, she knew this was something genuine.

Never would she have thought that her contractor would fall for anyone besides the half-elf. Never would she have thought that the cruel Witch of Vainglory, Pandora, was capable of loving anyone at all. Never would she have thought that they would fall for each other, out of all things.

Though, after looking at the two of them, Beatrice considered that it may possibly be for the best. Her contractor managed to sway an unswayable heart. A heart that held no true genuine care for anyone or anything except herself and her goals. He had completely changed that person; he made her become capable of true love. That in and of itself was a feat to be recognized.

Soon enough, however, the spirit grew tired of watching them sit there lovingly and coughed into her palm. Though the two of them failed to jolt, or give off any reaction referencing surprise, they both turned their heads to look at her.

Beatrice looked at them, now finally having their attention, "Betty apologizes to interrupt, however Betty feels that she must treat you two, I suppose. Do you think yourselves capable of walking?"

""Yes.""

To Beatrice's surprise, they answered at the same time with, what seemed to be, perfect synchronization. The two of them, also to the spirit's shock, didn't seem surprised about it at all. Instead, they only looked back at one another and gave each other pure sentimental smiles. Beatrice didn't even realize that she glared, since it disappeared as she got herself off of the bed and made her way to the door.

She opened it, turning to the two of them. "If you two can walk, then follow me. I'll get you something to drink for your throats, I suppose."

Since Pandora was closer to the edge of the bed than he was, she sat up first and gave him room to sit beside her. He moved to her right side, their hands still intertwined, both of them now sitting together at the edge of the bed. Together they stood up, simultaneously feeling their legs practically give up on them. They ended up pulling each other closer together, holding one another up so they both wouldn't fall down. Neither of them minded this, even if it was mildly uncomfortable with their hands still together, as they hobbled out of their room behind Beatrice.

Eventually, they made their way into the dining room. Beatrice was kind enough to both get the door for them, as well as help them ease into their seats. Instinctively, once they were both properly seated, they pulled the other's seat closer. In the end, they were practically directly next to each other with their conjoined hands resting between them under the table.

Beatrice disappeared for a few moments, mentioning that she'd be back with a beverage for both of them to help ease their throats and overall condition. The two of them were left alone, seated at the table in the dining room. In a way, them being alone together, seated with the other, felt reminiscent of their time sitting together hand-in-hand within the seal. As they both remembered those times, which felt like an eternity ago, they leaned their heads into each other. They started to twiddle their thumbs against the other's, once again just enjoying the other's presence accompanied with the physical feeling.

When the Great Spirit returned, she offered them both a small teacup with a beverage inside. Beatrice placed the cups in front of both of them on the table, before going to her own seat next to Subaru on his other side. The two looked at their drinks for a small moment before raising their free arms at the same time, picking up their cups and drinking it all in one gulp simultaneously. To say they hadn't drank in forever would have been an understatement. They almost felt as if such a small serving wouldn't be nearly enough to quench their seemingly infinitely built-up thirst.

Though, despite what they had expected, they seemed rather satisfied with their drink. Their throats felt better fairly quickly, no longer dry or in any kind of discomfort. In a way, they felt healed and refreshed.

Subaru turned to look at Beatrice. Pandora did as well, who perhaps had the same question on her mind as Subaru. Though, he was the only one that opened his mouth and began to speak, "Beako, what was that? When did you learn to make that? Because that was amazing." His voice was no longer as hoarse as it was, as well.

He expected her to look happy, or perhaps smug at the prospect of being praised. Instead, she kept an indifferent expression on her face as she replied, "It is just something Betty was required to make over time, I suppose." She took a sip of her own drink, not even bothering to look at him for a reason he didn't understand.

Subaru looked at her with a soft gaze. As if she read his mind and his emotions, Pandora squeezed his hand in reassurance. Subaru took a deep breath, focusing on what he wanted to ask his contracted spirit, despite it being painful for him to do. "Hey, Beako?" She finally looked at him, her eyes showing her true feelings to him. Feelings that made him worried and sad for her. Yet, he did his best to keep going. "Can..." he averted his gaze, finding it increasingly hard to talk to her about something as sensitive as this. Though, with another reassuring squeeze from Pandora, he focused his gaze back onto her and spoke again, "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Pain, I suppose," she answered flatly. "Pain is what happened. Betty and everyone else were in pain."

He didn't know what to say to that, only casting his eyes downward in shame. He felt a thumb caress the back of his hand to help him calm down, a gesture he greatly appreciated. However, nothing could completely wash away the guilt and shame he felt for leaving everyone the way he did. He knew he was responsible for the pain everyone felt. That's why it was his responsibility now to know what he caused to happen to everyone.

He looked back up at his contracted spirit, a hard and determined look on his face, yet a somewhat dark look in his eyes. "Please... tell me. Tell me what happened."

She was silent, looking at him blankly for some time. When his contracted spirit sighed, it threw him off for a moment. "Some of the things Betty will talk about may be things that are hard to hear, I suppose. Some things Betty regrets. Are you certain that you want Betty to talk? After Betty starts, she will not stop, in fact."

He kept looking at her with a hard gaze. If something happened to his friends, his family, while he was gone, while he had left them, he felt like he had to know. He needed to know what he caused to happen by leaving them.

He nodded his head, still determined. After he did so, Pandora wrapped her free arm around him. She pushed her face into his back as she held him close. It was her way of comforting him, knowing that he was going to have a hard time with the coming information. He was glad it was working, and he was glad she was there for him.

Beatrice sighed, scooting her seat closer to her contractor and taking his free hand into both of hers. She moved both of her thumbs across the back of his hand, almost as if to soothe herself. She looked up at him, into his eyes, "Very well, Betty shall tell you."

***Chapter 4*: Full of Grief and Doubt**

Firstly, I'm moving the rating up to Mature in preparation for possible situations in the future. Beatrice is also getting added to the story's character tags, for obvious reasons.

Also, I do read your comments/reviews (just in case you didn't think I did). I honestly really like reading them. To answer a few of those, there will be nobody else included in the pairing. Subaru and Pandora only.

Also, sorry this is such a long chapter (it's basically double chapter 2's length). I had a story to tell, so I told it, I suppose. I should also say that this story, especially this chapter in particular, has a lot of original story elements added to it.

This chapter is also not just a flashback or explanation of past events (this chapter will also be the last one to contain any kind of flashback), Subaru and Pandora are in this too. Next chapter will also be only Subaru and Pandora. Hope you all enjoy it.

Chapter 4: Full of Grief and Doubt

~After Subaru and Pandora are Sealed Away~

Beatrice let out small whimpers and cries as she kept the seal close to her chest. Her position on the ground was indifferent to how it was since she first got there. She thought that if she held it tighter and closer to her chest, to her heart and soul, that she would be able to feel closer to her Subaru. Deep within her mind she knew that was futile, but she couldn't help herself but to try out of desperation. Though, through her grief, she knew he was alive; she could feel their contract, even if he wasn't physically with her anymore.

It was almost immediate for her mind to start thinking of ways to bring him back, and it didn't take her long to realize something. Her face perked up, looking at the seal housed within her hands. He was gone, yes, but specifically sealed away. If he was only trapped in a seal, there had to be a way to break it. To set him free. Right?

She slowly picked herself up, her balance still slightly wobbly, and made her way over to the books with a small hiccup in her step. She looked at them for a moment, pulling the very same book Subaru had been reading earlier toward her. She opened it once more, skimming the words on the pages. She couldn't read it any better than she could before. However, she supposed that would have to change.

She put the seal away, only to make sure nothing would happen to it as she moved, but only after she gave it one last look of determination. She got to work at once, painstakingly taking each and every book she thought may be useful up to the carriage. Once she was satisfied, she made haste back to the mansion. She had no doubt that the knights, upon realizing their predicament, would be on their way back at some point. Perhaps they'd come with backup, or some other form of nuisance that would get in her way. The Great Spirit wished to vacate the area before their return.

As she rode back to the mansion, she opened one of the books. The language was foreign to her, for the most part. Subaru had been doing his best to teach her what he could. Her contractor had gone as far as to create a special notebook for her to study from, though she really hadn't gotten to studying the material yet. The only thing she knew how to read and write in Subaru's language was his name, in fact. He had taught it to her himself; it was the first thing he taught her. She lightly smiled to herself at the memory. She closed the book, stacking it with the rest she had taken, before taking the seal in her hands once more and holding it close.

She stayed like that for the entire journey back, not once moving her body or gaze as she concentrated only on her connection to Subaru. She would get him back. She wouldn't fail again; she wouldn't fail him. She swore it on her very being.

Her carriage came to halt without her paying attention. Her eyes softened, almost regrettably. She was not looking forward to the interactions to come. Beatrice sighed, taking one last long look at the seal her contractor laid imprisoned inside of before putting it away. She may as well make this quick and not get any more involved than she needed to.

The Great Spirit of Yin got out of the carriage in moderate haste. The faster she did these interactions, the faster she could start her work, she supposed. Upon exiting, she was met with two identical maids at the entrance of the mansion. The one on the right, with blue hair, had a smile on her face, as if she were looking forward to this moment. The one on the left, with pink hair, sported an expression of indifference. However, Beatrice knew, under the mask of indifference laid a sincerity of friendship, care and fondness. Mentally, the spirit sighed, not looking forward to what was about to happen.

The maids simultaneously bowed their heads in greeting, "Good evening, Beatrice-sama."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at their synchronized words. It annoyed her. In fact, a lot of things were going to annoy her from now on. "Raise your heads, Betty has devastating news, I suppose." The blunt statement did not go unnoticed by the twin maids, who, upon request, raised their heads and looked at Beatrice with questioning gazes.

The blue haired maid, after a moment, took her eyes off of Beatrice and started moving them around the area. She was looking for him, Beatrice had no doubt. When she didn't find him anywhere nearby, she looked back at the spirit and asked, "Beatrice-sama, where is Subaru-kun?"

At the question, the pink haired maid perked up as well. She similarly gazed around the area, though not as long as her sister did, "Yes, where is that Barusu? Don't tell me he-

She shut her mouth at the look the Great Spirit was giving her. A glare that was leagues above her own; a glare that screamed bloody murder. "Take great care in how you speak of Betty's contractor, maid," Beatrice's tone was sharp, focused and threatening. The two maids were immediately tipped off and on edge, wondering what happened to make the Great Spirit act like this.

"B-Beatrice-sama..." the blue haired maid stuttered out, making herself the new target of the spirit's glare. The spirit had no doubt that the maid figured out that something must have happened to her contractor, considering her own actions and attitude upon her return. "Is-Is Subaru-kun okay?"

Beatrice studied the maid's face for a moment, seeing nothing but genuine concern for her contractor. At that, Beatrice softened her eyes into more of a dead stare as she began to speak once more, "Control your sister. Betty will not tolerate such language against her contractor anymore, in fact."

Uncharacteristically, right after those words were spoken, the pink haired maid bowed once again. "I am deeply sorry, Beatrice-sama. I will not talk negatively about Bar-Subaru-sama again."

Beatrice growled, more than just annoyed at this point. She wanted to leave and start her work. "You best stick to that statement, in respect to Betty's contractor's sacrifice."

The two maid's expressions turned into ones of confusion and worry. They had no idea of what the Great Spirit was talking about, yet dreaded it.

Seeing their looks, Beatrice growled again, as she held the seal up for them to see. "Betty's Subaru is gone, in here, in fact. He sealed himself away for all eternity so the

Witch of Vainglory cannot roam free. As Betty said, you best do well to respect his sacrifice. That is all you need to know, I suppose."

The blue haired maid audibly gasped, loudly, at the revelation. Subaru was gone? Sealed away for all eternity? The more her mind thought about the implications of those things, the more she started to cry. The pink haired maid, albeit not crying, visibly showed regret and sadness on her face. She moved to help comfort her sister, putting an arm around her and rubbing her back to try and ease her.

Beatrice put the seal away again, not bothering to look at the maids as she moved to pass them. "Betty will rely on you to tell the other residents this news, I suppose. Betty also brought back books. They are in the carriage, bring them to Betty's room at once after you've composed yourselves, I suppose."

With that she walked away, taking a direct course to her and Subaru's shared room. She barely registered anything else, only her path, destination and her thoughts.

A part of her regretted the way she acted, knowing that her Subaru wouldn't approve, but the majority of her didn't care. The vast majority of her being didn't care about them, and thus didn't care about how bluntly she told them the news and their feelings afterward. After all, the only one she really, truly cared about was gone now. Not for long, though. She would get him back, even if it cost her another four hundred years of her life.

After a bit of walking, she was barely able to faintly register two more people walking down the hallway. They were in front of her, taking up her line of sight. The blonde boy gave her a wide, toothy smile as he exclaimed, "Oi, where's Cap'n!" Beatrice winced. He was too loud.

"Talk to the maids, I suppose," she simply answered as she kept walking. That was all the information they needed from her.

The blonde boy turned around, his eyes following the Great Spirit with a mild glare. He was about to pursue and demand answers, but an arm held him back. "Brotto, what the fuck are you doin'! She just blew us off without tellin' us where Cap'n is!"

"I know, I know," Otto looked at one of his surrogate brothers with an unsure expression, "but Garf, look at her."

The two adjusted their gazes to her, quickly examining her face before she walked past them. If she noticed their attention on her, she didn't show any signs of it. Garfiel looked at Otto with an expression of confusion, "Yeah, she's lookin' sad. Only another reason to find Cap'n! He'll know what ta do!"

Otto sighed at his brother's stubborn determination. "That's just it. What if something *happened*?" Otto did his best to make his point clear, but seeing as how Garfiel still wanted to get answers from the Great Spirit he then proposed another option. "Look, let's just go talk to Rem and Ram like Beatrice-sama said. They probably know what's going on."

Garfiel let out a low growl, shoving his hands to his sides. "Fine..." The two continued to minimally converse as they proceeded toward the main entrance, both of them only taking one more look back at the retreating spirit as they left.

Beatrice just kept walking. She barely took the time to pay attention to their interaction, only telling them what she needed to and then focusing her mind on other things. She zoned out as she walked further into the mansion, finally reaching her shared room. She turned the knob, quickly opening the door and stepping inside. She closed the door with a slam, taking off her shoes before climbing onto the bed. The maids will bring her books to her soon enough, all she needed to do was wait.

As she lay on the bed, staring up into the ceiling, she started to feel cold. The absence of a significant source of heat made her feel chilly and alone. The bed felt unusually

open, and somehow more uncomfortable than it ever did. She didn't like laying on a bed by herself anymore; she knew that now. She never did realize that her tears began to stain that very same bed.

As she waited in her shared room, the rest of the mansion was starting to unfold into minor chaos as word spread. Subaru meant a lot to the mansion's residents, and upon hearing what happened to him many broke down in their own ways.

When Garfiel and Otto made it to the main entrance of the mansion, they only saw Ram. She seemed to be busy carrying a load of books in the direction Beatrice had gone. Her face, though moderately hidden behind the stack of books she was carrying, held a particularly downcast expression.

When she saw them, she immediately started to speak, "Perfect. Garf and merchant boy, take these to Beatrice-sama. I must go find Lord Roswaal at once."

She put the books on the ground in front of her, immediately beginning to turn around and make haste to Roswaal's office. "Oi, Ram! What the hell is goin' on!? The damn clown can wait, so tell us!"

Garfiel's question subsequently made her stop. She didn't turn to look at them, only pausing in place for what seemed like minutes before she spoke to them, "She didn't tell you?"

"T-Tell us what?" Otto stuttered out, slightly fearful of the maid's tone. It was sharp, empty almost, but held a hint of remorse with a batch of sadness. He wasn't ready to hear what she had to say at all.

After another long moment of silence from the maid, she slightly turned toward the two of them. Her eyes were downcast and sad, so she did her best to hide them from the two behind her. "Bar-... Subaru is gone. Forever. That is all I will say. More details will be explained later, I must go to Lord Roswaal now."

She hurried off, leaving the two behind in their own thoughts as she went to find her lord. The two boys just stayed silent for a while, none daring to break it, both dealing with the news in their own way.

Garfiel clenched his hands into fists as tight as he could. His teeth clamped together as he snarled. Then, without warning, he screamed, throwing his arm back, at a speed Otto couldn't fathom, and punching a hole into the closest wall he could find. "DAMNIT!" He yelled, over and over again. He no doubt thought of himself as weak — too weak — to protect someone close to him, once again.

Otto stayed silent all through Garfiel's tantrum and even as the blonde boy walked away with tears. Otto assumed he would look for his sister, but he wasn't thinking about it too much. His face darkened, his hand putting his signature hat to his chest in a mourning fashion. He felt like a failure of a friend.

With nothing else to do, the merchant boy picked up the books that were left on the floor and brought them to the spirit that requested them.

As this was happening, a blue haired maid knocked on a door elsewhere in the mansion. "E-Emilia-sama!"

The door opened soon after her exclamation, "Ah, Rem-san! What brings- are you okay? What's wrong?" The half-elf candidate tilted her head, a finger on her chin in wonderment as she noticed Rem's crying and distressed face.

"It-Its about Subaru-kun..." Rem trailed off, her gaze shifting slightly off to the side. She lightly wiped some of her tears with her arm, sniffing a little bit in an attempt to contain her sadness. For her, telling this girl the news would be the hardest thing she's ever done. She didn't know how to do it.

Emilia only smiled at the maid, "Ah, so that's it? You're worried about Subaru?" She giggled, as if finding Rem's behavior adorable. "After everything you two went through in Vollachia, I guess you're really worried for him, huh." She put her arms around Rem, bringing her head close to her chest, much to the maid's shock. "Don't worry, Rem. I'm sure he's-"

"He's not!" The maid pushed herself out of the candidate's arms, tears now falling down her face like a waterfall. "He's not okay! He's-..." she stopped talking, taking a moment to calm herself a little bit before she shared the news. "Subaru-kun... Subaru-kun is gone, Emilia-sama!"

It was quick, but Rem noticed how Emilia's eyes changed. It was as if her pupils retracted, before returning back to normal. The smile on Emilia's face twitched for only a mere moment, before staying at a constant. Rem, even though she was still looking at Emilia's same cheery expression, could feel a completely different aura behind it.

"Gone? Don't be silly, I'm sure he's fiiiine," it was too nonchalant for her to say something like that, in Rem's eyes. She was just told that Subaru, her precious knight, someone she cared about, was gone; yet, she waves it off. Rem figured that the half-elf was in some form of denial. A denial that she would, unfortunately, have to smash to bits.

Rem, though she didn't want to, insisted on the situation's seriousness, "Emilia-sama... Beatrice-sama herself told Rem and sister. He..." she shifted her gaze away again, attempting to find the right words to explain what had been told to her. "Beatrice-sama said that he willingly sealed himself away, to protect us from someone." Rem became disgusted at the name of that someone, just by thinking about it.

Emilia's face didn't falter this time, but Rem noticed the aura around her intensify, "Did Beatrice tell you who it was, then? Must have been someone reeeeeeally important for Subaru to do something like that."

Rem did not want to say the name, mainly out of pure hatred and disgust, but to answer Emilia's question, she did so anyway. "Beatrice-sama said... it was someone with the title 'Witch of Vainglory.'"

At that, Rem immediately felt a change within her superior. Rem unintentionally compared it to a twig, a small and fragile twig, that snapped clean in two with an audible break. That's what Rem felt like happened to Emilia, as her aura uncontrollably increased to terrible measures.

"I see," Emilia said simply after a long vein of silence. Rem looked up at the half-elf, teary-eyed. She didn't know what she would say next, but Rem had a feeling that it wouldn't be good. "Please leave."

Rem perked up at the request- no, demand. "H-Huh?" She looked at Emilia's 'cheerful' smile and expression, slightly scared.

"Please leave, Rem."

That was all it took to make Rem flee at the candidate's demand. She took a quick bow before closing the door and departing from the area in a hurry.

The half-elf girl never stopped smiling, even after Rem left her room. She turned from the door, taking small steps to the middle of the room. Her mouth started to move in repeated motions, as if she were saying the same thing over and over again: a name. She repeated a name to herself with pure hatred and disdain, with each repeat leaving her more and more distressed and agitated. Her hands began to clench onto her outfit, the room's temperature dropping as her condition worsened. The name she repeated grew louder, louder and louder until she practically screamed it with pure hatred. With one final scream, ice expanded quickly out from under her and covered the entirety of the room. Everything, anything the eye could see, was covered in a thick layer of ice.

Once the expansion of ice settled, Emilia fell to her knees. She put her hands to her face, covering it, to try and stop the tears that began to fall. She stayed that way for a while, muttering a different name with a sense of longing, need and want.

She wouldn't find out until later that she froze a small portion of the entire mansion in her outburst.

Roswaal Mathers, the Margrave and Court Mage, felt that something was off when he awoke that morning. He did not know why, or how, but he had a peculiar feeling rising from deep within him that something would go wrong this day. It put him on edge, enough to the point he had almost stopped Subaru and Beatrice from leaving that morning. Though, he didn't. He figured, with Subaru's ability to redo, things would have turned out fine in any reality.

Though, when the Margrave heard a knock on his door, followed by the sight of a downcast Ram, he felt as if he had been mistaken. Despite that, he did his best to act like his normal self, smile, speech and all, as he greeted her, "Well, if it isn't my deeeear Ram. What briiiiings you here?"

She, in what Roswaal assumed to be an act of pure willpower on her part, walked into the room and looked straight into his eyes. He could tell that whatever was happening with her, was not the easiest thing to handle. Just from her eyes alone, could he tell.

"Lord Roswaal, there is dire news," she brought it upon herself to bow to him, as a sign of respect. Similarly with the way she spoke, she did her best to compose herself. He paid it no mind, his attention entirely taken by whatever situation she found herself concerned with.

"What is it, Ram?" Roswaal took it upon himself to drop his smile and signature speech. His face took on an expression of seriousness, unwilling to take the situation lightly.

"Subaru-sama is gone, Roswaal-sama," she said quickly in reply. She bowed again, a cheeky way to hide her gaze from his face.

The Margrave's eyes narrowed, his mouth flipping to a frown. "Under what circumstances?"

Ram raised her head again. Roswaal knew right away that she didn't know all of the details, just from how unsure and nervous she looked. He mentally sighed; it was no matter, he'd get the details later in some form or another.

"Beatrice-sama came back alone, with a multitude of books from her expedition," Ram started, immediately gaining Roswaal's attention. Books, hm? How interesting.

"Subaru-sama was not with her. When we asked for his whereabouts, Beatrice-sama showed us a small stone tablet of sorts. She did not explain much, but she said that he sealed himself away from all eternity, inside of that stone tablet, a sacrifice to keep someone named the Witch of Vainglory from running free."

At the Witch's title, Roswaal made no effort to hide his widened eyes and look of pure shock. His maid noticed his reaction, developing a curious look of her own. Perhaps some of it was even skepticism. She dared herself to ask what she questioned, "Lord Roswaal, do you know of that Witch?"

He snapped out of his inner thoughts, looking at her with an indifferent look, though still serious, "Yes, I do." His answer was simple and honest, as he looked up to the ceiling. He started to remember his very long history with his teacher, what she taught him, what he learned. One of the things he was told about back then was this particular Witch. He looked back at his maid, "The Witch of Vainglory, truly a dangerous menace. Able to change reality with a single sentence, the slightest touch... a walking disaster. It is very unfortunate that Subaru-kun had to ever encounter her."

Ram's eyes widened, clearly shocked. Roswaal wondered if it was right to let her know this information so soon. She still hadn't completely processed Subaru's absence yet, after all. He was not blind as to not notice the change of her signature nickname for the boy. Something regarding her view on Natsuki Subaru had changed. Springing something so influential onto her so soon could break her more.

"Though the fact remains," Roswaal continued, looking at his maid with an undefined gaze. "Subaru-kun's deed should not go unappreciated, for his action has benefited everyone in this world greatly."

Ram only looked at him for a brief moment, before giving him a small nod of understanding. Roswaal hummed, both in acknowledgment and thought. He knew that, since Subaru was sealed, he likely could not use his ability. Thus, there was no point in anything else regarding himself and any actions he could do. He was stuck, in a way. Stuck in a tight spot where he could do nothing but sit, do nothing and wait. That bothered him for a multitude of reasons.

"You may go, Ram," Roswaal stated, his voice stern yet understanding. "I am sure that your dear sister needs you."

Ram's eyes widened once more, bowing to him quickly as a sign of respect and gratefulness. After that, Roswaal only saw her leave in search of her sister. At that moment, the Margrave let out an audible sigh. He was sure that this situation will end up breaking the camp apart. It was only a matter of time now. Oh how he dreaded how the little maids, Petra and Louise, and even Meili would react to this.

He felt guilty, shockingly. His guilt was something he was unable to fathom, because he didn't regret anything he had done to the boy. He didn't regret anything, yet was guilty. One such guilt was not stopping him from leaving, even though he had his worries.

He closed his eyes, "Ever the hero, aren't you." His statement was simple, yet held signs of respect and guilt. He truly respected the actions of Natsuki Subaru, and more so ever since their 'duel' at the Sanctuary. Seeing the young boy's actions, his attitude, his nature only made Roswaal guilty more and more. Even now, his guilt ate at him, learning of what he did this time. He opened his eyes, his gaze soft and thoughtful, "I was wrong, we are not alike. You are better than I ever was, than I ever can be, Natsuki Subaru."

Beatrice was a little surprised when Otto arrived with the books she requested. She had not expected him to be the one to deliver them; however, when she noticed his downcast expression, she figured that the maids pushed the task onto him, presumably just after telling him the news. When he left, the little spirit only sighed.

She got to work immediately. First thing was first: she must study and properly learn her contractor's language. She got up, going over to a specific area of the room and pulled out a hidden hook. Her hand lightly caressed the cover as read the name: '*How to write Japanese 101*'. Truly a name her contractor would choose for a study book, she supposed.

When she first sat down again and opened said book, she did not expect herself to start shedding tears. Looking at her contractor's words, his own handwriting, his tips to her in the book, made her queasy in her own sadness. She had to snap herself out of her stupor multiple times. She didn't expect this to be easy. In fact, she considered it to be the opposite. Learning an entirely new language would be difficult, at least at first, especially with her own emotional grievances getting in the way from time to time. That didn't falter her mindset though, as she was more than just determined to do what she had to do.

Truthfully, she didn't know how long she studied, practiced and learned. Hours, days, months? Who knew, honestly. She never moved, never expressed more than what she needed to, until she was finished. When anyone tried to see her, she always pushed them away, even the half-elf girl that her contractor was so fond of; she didn't care to consider how that affected them. Sometimes she cried for Subaru's memory, especially

when she looked at his motivationally written quotes inside of the book. When she failed, she motivated herself through unsavory means — including but not limited to self-insults and self-harm — so that she'd succeed. It happened a lot. Though, even through all of that, she managed to master Subaru's native language in writing and reading form.

It wasn't long before she delved deep into her next assignment: research into the books she had brought back. She ended up scattering the books on the floor, while she sat before them cross-legged. The books were all very unique to their own subjects and topics, with only some being thick and others exceptionally thin. A small few of the really thick books weren't labeled, so Beatrice assumed that they more or less contained a diverse amount of things.

She started with the thinner books, picking them up one by one and reading their names, "*Necromancy: Raising the Dead*," she shuddered a bit and put that one off to the side. She remembered the stories that Subaru used to tell her; stories about how the undead came back to the living, eating people and spreading themselves around like some kind of vicious man-eating plague. Truly terrifying. She did not want to mess with that book, not at all. Maybe she'd burn it.

She picked up the next book, then the next, and went on until she found something she was looking for. She was thoroughly surprised by the knowledge some of the books seemed to contain. "*Illusion Projection*", "*Memory Wiping*", "*Multiversal Transportation*", "*Forced Mutation and Evolution*", hmm... ah!" she finally exclaimed, finally finding what she was looking for. "*Seals, Barriers and Pocket Dimensions*," she recited.

She lightly smiled, a little proud of herself. She held the book in her hand, noticing it's particularly moderate thickness. She opened it to the first page, skimming over the book's index for what she was mainly in search of.

As she started to flip through the pages, handwritten by the Great Sage himself, she caught glimpses of titles regarding many other different seals. With each section of seal, the book listed a description of it, how it worked, ample warnings when dealing with it, and more information she didn't bother to further investigate. As she kept eagerly flipping pages, she mused the fact that the Witch of Envy's seal would be listed somewhere inside; however, she quickly discarded the thought and continued with her main objective.

She unintentionally let out an audible squeak of joy when she finally found the page she was looking for. The page titled '*The Seal of Eternity*', laid before her eyes. She let herself get moderately happy, excited even. She felt so close to getting him back.

She put her finger on the book, using it to help herself read its contents, "The Seal of Eternity, initially made to seal away the Witch of Envy. The seal is intentionally made of a small, thin yet nigh impossible to break stone with a guardian's symbol at its center."

Beatrice finished reading aloud to herself, taking in every word and detail from the pages. The spirit ended up revealing that very seal to her eyes, holding it in her hand. She gazed at it for a small moment before returning her eyes to the book.

She began to read again, "The seal itself uses powerful Yin magic, which has been embedded into the stone itself, to create its own pocket dimension. This creates an entirely new space, one which entirely warps the progression of time making it so those trapped inside spend that of multiple eternal lifetimes. Upon further consideration, this seal was too dangerous to be used, as it could only be operated in a self-sacrificial manner."

Beatrice's smile completely faded, almost shedding tears once more, remembering very clearly how her contractor gave up his life. He sacrificed himself so that she — so everyone — could live safely. Now upon reading what he was likely going through in there, she became sad. What if he was suffering in there? What if the Witch was hurting him? She only pushed herself to read faster. The sooner she got him out, the better.

"Using this seal on the Witch of Envy would have not been possible, lest the user succumb to a significant drawback," she continued to read. "In order for the Seal of Eternity to be used optimally, the user must have skin-to-skin contact with the target. Upon activation, the seal then seals both the user and anyone else in direct contact with them. Due to its inactive usage, and its overwhelming power, it will be locked away."

It suddenly occurred to her that this was the very same book that Subaru had been reading right before he had left her. She had to shake her head, snapping herself out of her inner thoughts as memories from that day began to resurface.

She carried on, "The user, or activator, must be a Sage, Sage Candidate or possess great magical power. This additionally works for releasing anyone captive inside; the user's power must be equivalent or greater than those captive inside. To activate or deactivate the seal, the user that meets any one those requirements need only will it so." Upon reading that sentence, Beatrice felt herself break. She quickly grasped the seal in her hands, looking at it with wide and progressively tearful eyes.

She tried, tried, tried and tried again. So, that was why it didn't work. Because she wasn't strong enough, right? She was too weak. Too weak to protect her Subaru then, and too weak to bring him back now.

With a completely sudden rise of anger and frustration, she closed the book with a hard slam, kicking it across the floor. Then, in another fit of rage, she threw the seal, which had been in her hand, at the wall. It flew through the air quickly, striking and leaving a dent in the wall, accompanied by a loud bang from the impact, before falling back onto the floor.

Beatrice looked at the stone tablet for a small moment as it settled on the floor, but once her anger soothed down her eyes immediately widened. She rushed over to the seal, crawling over the floor without care. She moved so fast and so distracted that she ended up hitting her head against the wall. It hardly bothered her, though, since she only grasped the seal in her hands and proceeded to hold it tightly to her chest with an audible whine.

She sat there in that spot, grasping the seal to her chest as she continued to cry. It was as if she'd just been sent back to the start; as if she'd been completely returned to zero. Her mind felt lost, broken and everything else seemed entirely hopeless.

She flinched and jumped when she heard the door to her room open. It was unexpected, since she had pushed anyone that came away. She didn't think anyone would just waltz in after the treatment she had given them before. She didn't turn around, instead stiffening her body and keeping herself frozen in place at her current position.

She heard a sigh from behind her, followed by the sound of a closing door. Whoever had come to see her, had just invited themselves in. Then, to make things even worse for her, they took a seat on the bed. Beatrice fought the urge to let out a loud growl of annoyance and frustration.

Though, she was patient. Perhaps if she waited long enough, this person would just leave the room? They'd leave her alone to drown in her mistakes and sorrows? That was what she hoped for, at least.

But, unfortunately for her, that never happened. Instead, the two sat in an unintentional silence that made her rather uncomfortable. She could feel the person's gaze drilling into her back, with what expression she couldn't tell, but she could feel their eyes on her.

Eventually, she gathered the strength to turn her head around. She momentarily widened them in moderate surprise, not honestly expecting the sight of this person in particular, before shifting them into a glare, "Did you come to just sit there, I suppose?"

The person, or rather man, that came to visit the grieving spirit was none other than the once eccentric clown: Roswaal. The man was wearing a rather normal attire, according to Beatrice's standards of him at least, and lacked his usual make-up. His eyes, Beatrice noticed, were more let down than she expected them to be.

The formerly eccentric man answered simply, "No, I did not." He kept his eyes on her, his voice lacking his usually drawn out high tone. "I was passing by and heard a rather loud noise, so I figured I should check up on you."

The Great Spirit of Yin kept her glare on him, but soon turned her head back to face the wall. "Betty doesn't need you to be concerned for her, I suppose."

Silence then ensued, the eccentric man's eyes falling upon the wall above Beatrice. "Ah. Well, I understand what that noise was about now."

The girl only stayed silent, unintentionally holding the seal tighter to her chest. She clearly did not like being reminded of her careless action, and Roswaal noticed.

"I apologize for bringing it up, Betty."

She growled, as if she disliked him calling her that, "You found out what was wrong, so leave now."

He didn't answer right away, but when he did, he asked another question, "Do you know how long?"

"Betty knows how long it has been, I suppose."

Silence again. Beatrice hated it, but didn't bother adding to her demand. She just wanted Roswaal to leave so she could reflect and wallow in her own failure.

"Betty..." he started, his tone almost similar to how he would talk to her 400 years ago. "Do you not think you are going too far?"

She snapped her head back to him, a predatory snarl on her face as she yelled, "Isn't this what you would have done!?" Roswaal flinched at the statement, his eyes somewhat widening. "If-If your precious maid had befallen this same curse, or mother?! Tell Betty you wouldn't be in her position right now, in fact!"

Roswaal was just stunned. In response to the girl's words, he only hung his head. She only spoke what was true, something he could not refute or deny.

"That's what Betty thought, I suppose," her expression slightly lightened up, but her eyes kept their ferocious glare. "Just a pathetic man, chasing an impossible end. Truly saddening, in fact."

Roswaal stayed silent, possessing no words to say. He averted his gaze, staring straight in front of him and at the wall. Again, she was only right. He was pathetic, wasn't he? A failure of a man, who had nothing to live for anymore without a goal. Without an end. Oh how desperately he wanted to atone that.

Suddenly, he opened his mouth, "We're leaving tomorrow morning, Betty."

Beatrice kept her hardened eyes fixed on him, though her expression shifted to one more fitting of curiosity. "What do you mean, I suppose?"

Roswaal put his gaze back onto her, an expression of indifference dawning his features. "Emilia-sama has become... more and more impulsive, distant... reactive. She is slowly losing her sense of self. The Royal Election had already become forfeit, but we hope to help stabilize her mind at the very least. Being here, at this location, seems to only worsen her."

Upon Roswaal's explanation, Beatrice merely hummed in acceptance. She had a rough understanding of what he was talking about. She had overheard once or twice that the

half-elf had been 'distracted' ever since she heard the news. She kept muttering the name of her Subaru with longing, as well as a different name with pure hatred and disdain; the name of the Witch. She brought herself out of her thoughts; now was no time to ponder on the half-elf's history with that Witch. "I see," she started. "Betty does not care about what happens to the half-elf, but good luck, I suppose." She turned back to the wall again, "Do not think Betty will come with you."

"I was not planning on asking," Roswaal responded immediately, his tone of voice slightly let down. Beatrice was admittedly a little surprised at the answer he provided her. "You, as well as that seal, being around may only worsen things. I shall take whoever is left here with us, but you may occupy this mansion as if it were your own." Roswaal softened his gaze somewhat, "You should also do something to help yourself. You are already not in the best shape, and I only fear that it will get worse."

Beatrice clenched the seal in her hand, her gaze slightly softening as she looked at it. "Betty will never stop trying to bring her Subaru back. No matter how many times Betty may fail and hurt herself. No matter how futile it may be. Betty will not stop, I suppose."

Roswaal looked at her, his facial features somewhat shocked and mouth slightly agape. Though, soon enough, he lightly smiled to himself. "I suppose you and I are more alike than I thought."

"Betty is nothing like you, in fact." Beatrice stated coldly. Though that did not deter Roswaal, as the tiny fraction of a smile he had continued to remain on his face. He closed his eyes, satisfied. Silence consumed the room once more, but the Great Spirit soon had something to ask. "What of any visitors?"

Roswaal re-opened his eyes, looking at her backside as she continued looking at the wall. "There should be little to none. Anyone coming to pay respects to Subaru-kun has already been deterred. That included multiple members of other camps. I have closed off borders to this domain, as well. You should have no issue, but if you do I have no doubts that you can deter them."

Beatrice hummed in acceptance, unwilling to reply to the man with words. She didn't want to speak anymore than was required, now. It tired her- no, she was already tired. She honestly just wanted to be left alone.

However, Roswaal had something more to say to her, "Would you like to talk, Betty?"

At that proposition, she turned to face him. "Talk? To you? Why would Betty want to talk to the likes of you, in fact."

Roswaal closed his eyes, sighing. He was a little hurt by the statement, but did not seem deterred. In truth, he wanted a chance to reconnect with her. He had long since missed that opportunity throughout the many years that had passed since his teacher's death, but, all of a sudden, he felt compelled to try now. Masking his own personal reasons, he offered, "I am the best mage in all of Lugnica. Perhaps, if you're having trouble, I may be able to help?"

Beatrice gave him another nasty glare, her eyes drilling deep into his very soul. Her glare actually made Roswaal gulp in slight nervousness, unsure of what she was thinking. She proceeded to stay silent for a few moments, before finally relenting. She reluctantly filled the man in on her progress and what she had come to discover from the book. He seemed intrigued, not unmotivated in the slightest in his next course of action.

"I see," he put a hand to his chin, in thought. "Would you like me to try?"

She, reluctantly once again, handed the seal over to Roswaal's hands. He held it lightly, his careful gaze laying upon the strange stone. He closed his eyes in focus, using the knowledge that Beatrice had given him to try and set those inside free. After a few moments, he opened his eyes again.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't do it," he gently handed the seal back over to the spirit's hands. She held it protectively, as she looked at the Margrave.

"It was worth a try, I suppose." She sighed sadly, giving Roswaal a slightly appreciative glance before sulking back into her spot.

Roswaal thought to himself, seemingly pondering something. He seemed unsure, as he looked between the sulking spirit and his own hands. A part of him refused to go through with the suggestion he had in mind, but another part of him wanted the opposite.

Eventually, he looked at his old companion and friend. "Betty... I might have a way for you to accomplish your goal."

She turned to him, her face signifying that of shock and surprise, but soon doubt. "What are you trying to fool me with, I suppose."

Roswaal shook his head, "I am serious." He looked at her, his gaze stern and unmoving. When she looked into them, she understood his seriousness and genuinity. Her face adopted a similar expression, as she asked:

"Then what does Betty have to do?"

The Margrave finally stood, taking small steps toward the spirit on the ground. Beatrice stood too, looking up at him with determined eyes. Roswaal's gaze narrowed, "I must warn you. What I will teach you is incredibly considered to be dangerous. You may watch and feel yourself change beyond who you are now. You may lose some parts of yourself as a whole. I do not say that lightly. Are you certain that those risks are worth your goal?"

Beatrice's own eyes narrowed, "Betty does not care, in fact. Betty will do what she must to atone for her failure."

Roswaal looked into her eyes, as she looked back into his. The two engaged in an intense staredown, involving wits, will and determination. Eventually Roswaal's gaze broke from hers, seemingly completely acknowledging her conviction, as he turned around, "Very well then. Follow me."

The Margrave walked over to and opened the door, quickly proceeding to walk out into the hallway. He didn't stop to wait for the Great Spirit, who seemed stunned and frozen in place with moderate shock. But, seeing as Roswaal wasn't slowing down or waiting for her by any means, she snapped out of it and did her best to catch up to him.

Beatrice silently followed her old friend all the way through the mansion, then out the front doors. They had not encountered or passed anyone on their way out. It hardly bothered Beatrice; though she assumed that everyone was either asleep or preparing to leave. It was only after they had gotten outside, on a cool yet breezy night, that Beatrice decided to question him further, "Why is Betty out here, I suppose?"

He simply kept his pace, in which Beatrice followed the best she could. Even though he hadn't vocally answered her, the little spirit knew what his 'response' was meant to signify. She supposed she'd see soon enough.

At one point, they had crossed the lines into the forest. Once they had gotten deep enough, Roswaal suddenly stopped. Beatrice accidentally bumped into him, holding her head with a light growl. She hadn't expected him to stop walking so abruptly. She just took a stand by his side, forgetting about the minor annoyance that had just occurred, waiting similarly to how he was. Though, eventually, she got impatient, "What now, I suppose."

"Just wait," was his only reply. He stared ahead of him, practicing what he preached with steady eyes. It wasn't long before the trees began rustling, making Beatrice put up her guard.

A Mabeast appeared. It wasn't too big, nor was it terribly small. It was a moderate size, fitting that of its canine-like appearance. It snarled and showed off its teeth to them, as if it were planning to attack or trying to intimidate them. It moved slowly in front of them, waiting for the moment to strike.

Beatrice was about to swiftly eliminate the creature, raising a hand up in preparation. She was only stopped when Roswaal put his arm in front of her, blocking her from attacking. She looked up at him, suddenly understanding, before putting her arm down.

"Observe," Roswaal stated, taking small steps forward and toward the Mabeast. The Mabeast, noticing Roswaal stepping toward it seemingly in a weakened position, began its pounce. It jumped in the air, aiming for Roswaal's neck. Before it even had a chance to get close, Roswaal held out his hand and grabbed it, effortlessly holding it in the air. Suddenly, he spoke a command unknown to Beatrice, "Abso."

The Mabeast being held in his hands, which had already been squirming, began to get pulled toward Roswaal's body. The Margrave, upon seeing his spell working, let his grip loosen so the Mabeast could be pulled in without an issue. The thing had no chance of fighting back, as the suction of the unknown force was unmatched. Not even a second later, the poor Mabeast had been completely taken into Roswaal's body, disappearing without a trace.

Roswaal himself stood still for a minuscule moment, before dropping to one knee all of a sudden. Beatrice instinctively leaned in to try and support him, even though she wouldn't have been able to do much. As she did, she saw one of his eyes closed and his mouth gasping for air, all while a hand clenched his chest. "What-What was that?! Tell Betty, in fact!"

The Margrave took a moment to catch his breath, "That was... a Yin spell. An absorption technique..." he breathed out, slowly but surely regaining his breath.

"Yin... Absorption technique? Betty has never heard of such a spell before!"

He looked at her, "It was a spell... that I personally created many years ago." He tried to stand, which he did, but he ended up almost falling over again and had to hold onto a tree for support. His breath started to come back though, so he was able to talk in full sentences without huffing, "Its main purpose was to help me bring teacher back. But I never considered the consequences of such a spell at the time until it was too late."

Beatrice gave him a questioning, skeptical yet concerned look. "What consequences do you imply, in fact!"

"To absorb an entire creature, an entire being, not only amplifies your basic magic abilities but adds more. When you absorb any living thing, it becomes a part of you, it... changes you." His hand's grip on his chest began to lighten, feeling his heart settle down. "Their souls become entangled with yours, in a sense. You could lose your body or mind easily, or perhaps lose your life if too much was absorbed."

Beatrice's eyes widened, "Then what about you, I suppose?"

Roswaal sighed, "That was what happened to me." When Beatrice looked, she saw Roswaal was making a small gesture to his discolored eye. But she knew that wasn't all he was referring to.

Beatrice could tell that he had no desire in speaking of his previous usage with the technique in detail, so she didn't bother to try prying. Though, a thought occurred to her, "Why teach this to Betty if those are the consequences? Betty would surely 'lose herself' the more she uses this power, in fact."

He looked at her, his eyes sad yet full of conviction for his next statement, "Because I believe it will be different for you." When he saw her confused expression, he continued, "Despite being the best mage in Lugnica, I am still human. You... you are an artificial spirit. You may-"

"You think Betty may not be affected by some of these things because she is a spirit? Because she possesses an artificial soul, not a human one?" She finished for him, having read his mind perfectly.

Roswaal nodded, his eyes closing as he considered it. "Yes, that is what I believe."

Beatrice looked at him, an unreadable expression on her face, "Why teach this to Betty...?"

Roswaal noticed the change in her tone, opening his eyes to look at her. Even though she had asked this question before, the intention of asking was completely different. "Consider it as a part of me amending my previous sins, especially toward Subaru-kun." He looked up, barely able to see the night sky from their place in the woods. As he stared up, he spoke, "This is nothing compared to the pain I have caused the boy, and subsequently you as well, over these years," he looked back down at her. "If there is but a slight chance to bring him back, to make the two of you happier, then I will die with some subsided guilt."

She had an expression of shock on her face, sported with wide eyes and an agape mouth. She didn't know what to say in response to Roswaal's confession. "What-..." she struggled to find words, stuttering and tripping over herself a few times. "What do you mean die?!"

He ignored her question, "The technique gets stronger as you use it. The more things you absorb, the more you'll be able to handle casting the highest level of the spell. Abso, El Abso, UI Abso. You must start with the basic level first to build up enough power to use the next one." He stopped speaking for a moment, gathering his next words. "There is no condition to what you can absorb, as far as I am aware, only that more powerful beings can only be absorbed with higher level versions of the spell and that you cannot absorb beings that are more powerful than you." He closed his eyes, satisfied with his explanation, "I have no doubt that you will have little trouble in mastering this technique."

Beatrice truly had little to no words to say, incredibly and utterly stumped at Roswaal's behavior. She, in the many years of her life since her mother's death, did not expect this moment ever happening. With tears starting to form in her eyes, her teeth starting to clench, holding the seal tightly in her hand. Her tears began to flow more and more as she looked at it, once again hopeful. She had another chance.

She looked up at the man that had given her hope again with teary eyes, "Thank you, Roswaal."

He didn't answer, only averting his gaze to the side. He didn't want to look at her in that state. Truthfully, it hurt him. It made his guilt worsen. Before he could get too caught up in his guilt again, more rustling echoed from their side. Now with both of their attention fixated on the new noise, he spoke to her, "It seems as though you will get the chance to practice tonight."

Beatrice looked toward the sounds, seeing several emerging Mabeasts emerging from the trees. They weren't terribly big, similar or equivalent to the one Roswaal had taken care of earlier. All of them looked at the two of them with hostility, waiting for their opportunity to strike. Roswaal stepped back, fully intending to let Beatrice handle them on her own. He was not ignorant of her abilities; in fact, he was confident in them, especially her ability to learn. When it came to yin magic, she was always at the top of her game.

Beatrice shared one last glance with Roswaal, the man giving her a clear nod before she turned back to face the threat. "You do not need to physically touch a target. You need only focus on what you want to absorb, feel their aura around you and let it come to you."

The Great Spirit of Yin nodded, holding a vague yet clear idea of understanding to Roswaal's words. She put the seal away, taking a deep breath in an act of readying

herself. She opened her arms out, both of them fully extended out to her sides, closing her eyes in a deep and concentrated focus. Then, she spoke: "Abso."

It was quick. The many Mabeasts that had emerged felt an incredible force start to take hold and pull them toward the spirit. In an attempt to keep themselves stationary, some tried anchoring into the ground below them with their claws. However, that proved futile, as the force pulling them in was far too strong for them to fight against. All Mabeasts present were helpless, getting pulled in, condensed and absorbed into Beatrice's very being.

Beatrice herself felt odd as they first became a part of her. Her body seemed to shift on its own after every absorption. The sensation felt different each time, or did it feel the same? When the last Mabeast disappeared into her, she realized how minuscule those sensations actually were. Whatever feelings she had during absorption were gone, leaving her almost just as she was initially. She opened her eyes, putting her hands in front of her. She looked at them, focusing on herself; nothing about her seemed to have majorly changed, and she certainly didn't feel the same way Roswaal did. However, she definitely felt a small improvement within her. She felt just a tad stronger.

The man, who was watching her, hummed in satisfaction. "I shall take your lack of negative reaction as a success," he smiled at her. "Congratulations."

She was at a loss for words, only looking at her hands in silence. She only barely acknowledged Roswaal's words of congratulations, clenching her hands in and out, feeling for certainty that nothing was different.

"Beatrice." The use of her full name pulled her out of her own mind, her gaze turning to focus on Roswaal. The expression of full seriousness on his face did little to help ease her shock, which was only now steadily growing. He pulled out a small slip of paper from his outfit, handing it out to her. She took it, looking at the contents written on its surface. "This is where we will take residence after departing from here. Once you are ready, once you are nearing the end of your journey, come find me there."

Before the spirit could form any words to reply with, the Margrave had turned his back toward her and began walking away, out of the forest. She was surprised with his action, having the urge to reach out to him, but never committing to it.

Before he was too far away, he spoke to her again, "I must ensure everyone is ready for tomorrow's departure. I will... tell them you wish us farewell." He kept walking, not turning back. She barely heard him utter, "Goodbye, Betty."

When he was finally out of sight, did she let most of her tears fall. She didn't know what to feel. Sad, because now two people she held care for were gone, or elated because she had the chance to bring one of them back. At some point, she settled with a soft smile on her face, sniffing as she wiped some of her tears away, "Thank you again, Roswaal."

It did not take her long to find her resolve once more, a broken yet determined look dawning on her face. She looked out into the wilderness, ready to start her quest. She would not fail, not again. She would bring her Subaru back at whatever cost necessary.

She pulled the seal out one last time, giving it a hard look before setting off. She didn't bother to look back; she had all she needed with her, anyway. She knew the journey ahead of her would be long and grueling, but it would be worth it. The Great Spirit of Yin was about to live up to her name even more.

That's how it began. She started slow, using her newfound technique on the smaller Mabeasts and creatures she came across. The effects continued to be little to none, so she kept going. Days and nights went by, and for weeks and perhaps months she stayed on that routine. Find, absorb, repeat with little rest. She was always moving. That was the cycle and she always kept to it. It almost became a second nature to her. She got used to it, used to the feeling of having something being a part of her as more

and more joined the bond. Never had she truly appreciated having an artificial soul, or being a spirit, until now.

Of course, there were many different times where she struggled. Not only physically, due to the hardships of a journey on foot, but also mentally. Sometimes she would overthink things and become depressed. To comfort herself, she would always take a break and hold the seal close to her. She imagined her Subaru being there for her, hugging her, patting her head and telling her that everything was going to be okay. She yearned for those interactions, and she always imagined that it would come to pass at the end of her journey. It always helped her become motivated again to keep moving forward.

It took a long time for her to finally feel a big enough difference within her magical potential. From the start she could always feel the slight change within herself after every absorption. However, it was only after a longer time could she realistically compare the change to how she initially started. A magnificent difference and something she was inherently proud of. Of course, she gained much more than just amplification to her own magic affinity, but she barely let that concern her. All that mattered was that she was getting what she needed.

Though, once she reached that point, she noticed how little normal Mabeasts and creatures were giving her anymore. Normally the amount of increase they'd give her was minuscule, but it seemed as though they gave even less than that now. In a way, she supposed that was why all of them worked with the basic Abso spell. She needed to, somehow, up her game. Or in other words, as she recalled one of Subaru's sayings, she needed to level up.

Having reached something of a deadend, having had no luck in improving her gain, she fell into a minor depression. She was on her own, out in the wilderness, suffering due to her own failings. Some days and nights she found herself sitting alone, huddled in a ball with the stone tablet held close. Even when it rained, or even stormed, she wouldn't budge and would let herself become consumed by her inner thoughts and depression.

Eventually, she reluctantly returned back to the mansion. When she stood in front of the doors, looking up at the humongous building, she inwardly sighed. She truthfully held mixed emotions for the place, but this is where she ideally wanted to bring Subaru back to. She wanted him to feel at home, first and foremost, in a comfortable environment. Her hope was for him to recover here, and live a happy life.

She found herself back in her room. It felt odd to be back, seeing the room in the same condition — granted with a lot of dust on things — it was in before she left with Roswaal. She went over to the bed, taking her time to brush off some of the dust. She made a mental note to do the laundry later. Everything needed to be in peak condition for Subaru's eventual return.

As she thought of Subaru, she felt sad yet proud. He was still gone, not there with her, which was a fact that continuously smashed her heart to pieces. Yet, she was proud of the progress she was making. Every day, she was getting closer to getting him back. She may have hit a dead end now, but she swore on her life that she would conquer it.

She looked away from the bed. There was still a vast amount of books littered all across the floor, some still open from the last time she had read them. She sighed, picking some of them up and starting to put them away. She only stopped when a particular book caught her attention. She pulled it to her, opening the book to view its contents. Her eyes widened, clearly shocked.

Beatrice couldn't believe it; this book was exactly what she needed, no matter how much of a coincidence it may have been. A book that not only listed and provided detailed descriptions of ancient, more powerful creatures but it also mentioned where to find them. It was perfect.

As the Great Spirit took her time reading through the book, looking at the many different creatures, she noticed one... familiar looking creature. One she wouldn't mind paying another visit to.

However, first... she needed a new outfit. She was deeply attached to the one she currently wore, but its condition left much to be desired. Her constant movement and sitting out in bad weather during her depression really tore it apart. It was only a shell of what it used to be, and as much as it hurt her to discard, she did so anyway.

Using more knowledge that Subaru gifted upon her — yes, he taught her how to make clothes — she began the creation of her new outfit. It took several days, possibly weeks, of trial and error but she was eventually able to complete it.

It was largely based off of her old one, but the color scheme was vastly different. This one mainly sported a black layout, with some of the smaller gaps between certain areas consisting of a white or greyish filling. Some of the seams were also more of a blood red color. She did not completely understand why, but she didn't find bright colors very enticing anymore. Instead, she much preferred ones of a darker tone. When she first put it on, she felt as if, in a way, it perfectly matched her new self. She would have to be sure to take better care of this one.

With her clothing in order, she set out with a very precise destination in mind. Before long she found herself inside of the very tomb this all had started from. Specifically, she stood within the first trial chamber in front of a pile of fallen boulders.

She glared down at the rocks, very well knowing that underneath them existed very dangerous creatures. Ancient creatures, ones that she found listed within that book. This was truly perfect. She smirked for the first time in what seemed like forever. Those pathetic bugs would pay for ever attempting to harm her contractor. After this, she would not hesitate to use the book to find and eliminate more of those horrendous creatures from this world.

She blasted the rocks out of the way, exposing a decently wide and deep hole. Without hesitation, she jumped down into the nest; literally. She landed on her feet at the bottom of the cavern. When she looked up, the hole was quite high and the amount of light it let in was minuscule at best. The cavern she was in was definitely big.

She didn't waste time, using a spell to light up the large cavern she found herself in. Upon doing so, she greeted herself to the sight of their large, disgusting and oozing nest that occupied the entire other side of the cavern. The bugs began to notice her, finally, as they started to file out of their nest, or out of holes on other sides of the cavern. Beatrice only smirked more. This was good; she was glad that they noticed her. That made things easier.

The abominable creatures began to rush her, either on their legs or by taking flight. Beatrice remained unafraid, unmoving as they came closer and closer. Then, much similar to the first time she used the spell, opened her arms out wide to her sides. She closed her eyes, fully ready. "El Abso."

With that, the creatures lost any of the control they previously had as suction took hold. The ones that were in the air were the easiest to come in, with the ones on the ground attempting to anchor themselves but to no avail. From all sides, the creatures flew into her and became a part of her. She could feel every single one, and she enjoyed it. Oh how she felt the difference every single bug was making and she loved every second of it.

It was sudden, but she could hear herself start to let out unusual noises from her mouth. It was as if she was chuckling, giggling almost. It wasn't long before that seemed to evolve into full on laughter, which only increased in volume. It echoed throughout the entire cavern as bugs began to get forcefully ripped out of the nest to be absorbed. Beatrice didn't know why, but she was laughing. It didn't stop until every last bug was a part of her, none left behind, but even then she had a smile on her face. Her

pupils seemed retracted, and her expression blank as her laughs subsided into mere chuckles once again.

She stayed like that until she got outside again, in which she directed her eyes right up into the sunlight. She stared at the ball of light for a while, completely unaffected, before she felt something strange. Her body, suddenly, without warning began to feel different. She fell to her knees, her hands shaking as her body seemed to erupt into an unknown yet incredibly painful process. She screamed loudly in response to the pain, struggling to even get in a single breath, with nobody around to hear her. To her surprise, the pain stopped as suddenly as it began, leaving her with only a few odd feelings on her backside.

She went all the way back to the mansion like that, refusing to pay any mind to the feeling she had. When she finally arrived at the mansion, she found herself looking at her reflection and being utterly horrified at what she saw. Wings, not too terribly big, stuck out of her back. Six small appendages, three on each side, stuck out of her in plain view. She freaked out and screamed, unsure of what to do but still completely panicked and horrified as she asked herself questions. How was that possible? What happened? What did she do? How could she fix this?

When she painfully cut them off, they only grew back with the same amount of pain. She was stuck with them. At one point, it occurred to her that after absorbing those creatures her body had undergone a forceful mutation. She didn't know why or how it was possible, but knew it only happened once she used the next level of Abso. Perhaps that was the price she was supposed to pay? Was this what Roswaal had warned her about all that time ago?

Considering herself as a hideous abomination, she found herself once again sulking in a depressive state. She spent days like that, before getting herself together enough to finish the mission she gave to herself. Even if Subaru wouldn't accept her appearance and think she was ugly and horrifying, she would still do anything for him.

She realized a recurring cycle with herself. She would find herself low and depressed, but she would always bounce back because she knew she couldn't give up. Wasn't that how it always was? Even when she still occupied the Forbidden Library this was the cycle she lived for. Nothing had changed, after all, had they? This was all her life was meant to be, an endless cycle of pain and misery.

Beatrice also realized that, despite the horrendous mutation she underwent, the amplification of her power was significant. She felt so close to the end.

So it began again. Beatrice, using the mansion as a home to go back to after she ventured out, used the Sage's book to find and absorb many different ancient creatures using El Abso. She worked her way up, absorbing more powerful creatures as she went on. It didn't come without a cost, though, since after every absorption, she changed. Whether it be her body, her hair, her eyes or even her own mind she found herself changing into more of an abomination with each successful venture.

She made it a habit during that time to keep attempting to undo the seal everytime she returned to the mansion, holding out hope that one day, one of these times, the power she gained would be enough to set him free. Sometimes when it didn't work, she'd cry from the emotional, physical and mental pain she felt. She wanted it to end, so badly, but she wouldn't just give up, especially after she's come so far.

One day, it became too unbearable for her to withstand anymore. Her body, which had changed so many times, felt like it wasn't hers anymore. She barricaded herself in the mansion, in her room, curling up and crying as she endlessly experienced this unique form of pain. She was so close to the end of her journey, she could feel it, but everything just hurt too much.

When her mind and body alike began to rip and break apart, she tried to read every single book she had in an attempt to get her mind off of the pain. In a sense, she felt like she reverted directly back to her unhealthy roots: reading books to help ease her

inner pain. It did little to work, but at the very least she was able to alleviate the pain from her mind for a small amount of time. She held out little hope that, perhaps, one of those books would help her.

When she opened up a book about remedies and healing, she didn't expect it to contain anything useful to her situation. She didn't expect for that little spark of hope she held to be ignited into a roaring flame. But, imagine her surprise when she found something; a remedial tea that not only nullified most of the pain someone may feel but can also apply great healing effects to them as well. She was so incredibly lucky to have been able to make it herself with things she already had, combined with things she was able to find on her own.

The first time she drank it, she felt the effects instantly. The pain didn't go away, but she could feel her body start to change again, only this time it was different in a way she couldn't describe at all. When it finally subsided, most of her pain was gone. When she looked at herself, all physical mutations — aside from some of the passive ones, such as things in her hair and eyes — were gone. She felt healed and, for once in a very long time, alive.

It wasn't until the next day when she felt her body begin to turn back, once again succumbing to the unbearable pain of her transformation. Her abominable form was beginning to take hold of her again. She was barely able to drink the remedy again so it could subside. She found out that she had to drink the remedy at least once a day to keep her mutations in check. That night she cried, a product to what she was becoming.

When morning struck, she hardly realized it. The rays of light eventually pierced into the room, which inconvenienced her. In the back of her mind, she regretted not shutting the curtains. She forced herself up, with unnatural vigor. She walked over to the window and looked outside, a determined expression on her face. She was so close, she just needed one more push.

She made a large batch of the remedy and stored it away in portable bottles and vials, their purpose specifically to be taken out for a long journey. She made sure that she had enough before she ever set out again, this time in the direction of the Auguria Sand Dunes. If memory served her correctly, which it did, that place contained many different unique and powerful creatures.

She spent a good amount of time there, finally using the next level of the spell: UI Abso. She found out, on more than one occasion, that the more powerful, or perhaps ancient, a creature was, the more they affected her upon being absorbed. It was just as Roswaal told her. While this benefited her magical affinity, it ultimately damaged herself in great magnitude. The spirit had started consuming more of the remedy a day to compensate, something which forced her to leave the area early so she could restock.

"And that brings us to today, I suppose."

Subaru and Pandora both looked at her, the two of them still holding the other's hands tightly. Subaru's expression was complicated, to say the least. He looked at his contracted spirit with a look of immense guilt, sadness and shock. His mind was still processing every ounce of information he had been given, running it back over and over again in his head for him to comprehend.

Pandora's gaze shifted to Subaru, her eyes softly looking upon his features with a gentle kind of care. She moved her free hand to his cheek, lightly pulling his head into her own to connect them. Her mouth was forced down into a frown, as she clearly did not like seeing Subaru so utterly destroyed.

Though it was uncomfortable given where her head was currently positioned, the platinum-haired beauty shifted her gaze to the spirit. Said spirit was currently finishing her remedy, since she had skipped sipping it in favor of giving them an explanation in

the form of a story. Subaru may be too caught up in his emotions to notice currently, but there was clearly something wrong.

Subaru's gaze, which had subsequently been glued onto Beatrice in front of him, seemed to suddenly snap out of his daze. He opened his mouth, albeit shakily, "B-Beako, your... your eye."

Beatrice was confused for a very small moment, taking a second to think about what Subaru had been referring to. However, it didn't take long for her to understand what he was talking about, taking the cup into her hand and looking at her reflection through it. She suddenly yelped in surprise, covering her left eye as fast as she could.

It didn't take long for her to practically jump out of her chair, the cup still in her hand as she got to her feet. "B-Betty must go for now." She stuttered out, barely able to find her words. "Please stay away from Betty for a while... you may explore the mansion and go outside if you want. J-Just don't leave, p-please!"

With that, she bolted away, leaving Subaru and Pandora alone in the dining room. Subaru's eyes followed his spirit until she disappeared from his view, into a different room. A part of him desperately wanted to go after her, but he was just too stunned, too guilty to even attempt to do so.

He felt a slight increase of pressure on his hand, which helped him feel more at ease. He let out a large breath of air in an attempt to calm himself further. He repeated the process, as the girl that held his hand used her other hand to rub his back in small circles.

"Let's go outside," she suggested to him. When he turned himself to the side to look at her, he saw her expression become a bit brighter. Her mouth turned into a small smile, one that made him smile in kind. It was a genuine smile, something that Pandora had grown attached to seeing overtime. She liked when he smiled so kindly at her. It made her feel things that she could never get used to, like a flutter in her chest.

It took a moment before he responded to her, "Going outside sounds nice." To Subaru — and Pandora — it has literally been forever since he ever felt the presence of the outdoors. It had been so long since he looked out into nature, up into the sky as he felt fresh air hit his skin. He wanted to experience that again.

So the two, together, stood. Their balance was still off-putting, still not recovered nearly at all since their time back. They held onto one another again for support, helping the other walk all the way out of the room. Neither of them minded nor cared about it; in fact, they both quite enjoyed the fact that it brought them physically closer. They continued all the way through the mansion until they finally made it outside.

The two felt the breeze right away. It was neither fully day or night, instead the sun lay at rest on the horizon to the side. It was a very comfortable atmosphere to the two of them, as they helped themselves get settled onto the front steps of the mansion.

When they sat themselves down, they leaned into one another as if it were instinctual. As the breeze cooled them, they warmed each other. They found themselves in a silent, peacefully comfortable embrace. Even after the dread they experienced together, through the pain they heard and endured, after the truth was revealed to them by Beatrice, they still found themselves able to smile as they held each other.

If only they could stay like that forever, as they had been before being released from their confinement. However now they were back in the real world, surrounded by never-ending life and very real problems. The two seemed to acknowledge this at the same time, lightly separating from their embrace but keeping their hold on the other.

His smile seemed to fall, as did hers. She spoke to him, her voice calm, soft and kind, "Are you okay?"

He didn't reply with words, nor did he move his head in any direction. He only looked ahead of him, as if caught up in his own thoughts. She could tell that everything was hard for him right now. The bombshell that had exploded into his heart was massive and he still needed to recover, she knew and understood that.

When he finally lifted his head, she waited patiently for his response, "I don't know." It was a simple response, but the platinum-haired girl understood his feelings perfectly. "She's been through a lot this past year while we were gone. I thought that it was just hard for her to talk about certain things, but the more I think about it... what she said... the more I feel like it's not everything."

She nodded at his words, completely agreeing. She had noticed it as well, and he knew that. He merely waited to hear her opinion on the matter, which she would undoubtedly give him, "It is as if she is not telling the whole story."

It was Subaru's turn to nod, "Especially at the end. It felt like... it felt as if she skipped something important."

Pandora didn't respond to that statement directly, only silently agreeing to it. Neither of them knew what the spirit was hiding, and neither of them was sure if they were completely ready to find out. Subaru especially didn't know for certain if he was prepared for anything else to be revealed to him yet, especially anymore horrifying truths.

"I have more suspicions, as well," Pandora confided in him, her gaze looking out into the horizon ahead of her. Subaru's own eyes were fixated in a similar spot, as he waited for her to continue. "I find it strange. You mentioned that it has only been a year, but how could that be possible?"

He turned his head to look at her, something in which she matched. Their gazes met, his own eyes emitting something similar to understanding as he considered her words. "You're right... that seems-"

"-insufficient, considering everything she was required to do to release us." She finished for him, slightly smiling at him.

He lightly smiled back at the notion, but soon lost it as he started to speak again, "Yeah, exactly. She said that her magic power had to be equivalent to those she was releasing. I feel like a year is too little time to do that, especially because of..." he trailed off, using his hand to gesture to her, figuring she'd understand what he means, "plus everything else..."

He trailed off again, sighing as he started directing his gaze downward and away from her. Pandora frowned, clearly unhappy with his action. She put her free hand to his chin, lightly lifting it so he would look into her eyes. When they locked gazes, she saw the dread that filled him and he saw the conviction that filled her.

She spoke to him from the heart, "I may not have experience with this. I never had anyone close to me, besides you now." She smiled a little as she caressed the back of his hand in a soothing manner, trying to ease his self-doubt the best she could. Her face got a little closer to his, as if to try and reassure him even more. "However, that will not stop me from doing my best to help you. You are not alone, my Subaru. I will not let you be alone. Let's spend another eternity together, okay?"

He looked at her unchanged for a long while. At one point during the silence, the breeze had picked up and hit them with a wave of cold air. It was only after it settled, did the raven-haired boy start letting out a noise; a chuckle, to be precise. She gave him a small pout in response to that.

He smiled at her, though, especially after seeing her pout. "Sorry, sorry. It's like you can really read my mind sometimes. Not that I'm complaining, of course."

She let her face settle for a moment before she let out a giggle of her own, amused at what he said. She smiled to match his, slightly shaking her head, "It is not just me, we read each other's minds."

He chuckled again, "I suppose we do." He kept his smile, enjoying the playful banter he was having with his love. Not only did it help alleviate his mind from his stress and troubles but it only further strengthened his bond with her, which he cherished a lot. He spoke again, "Do you know what I'm thinking right now, then?"

She looked at him, a smile still present on her face as she playfully hummed. Before he even realized it, a soft pair of lips met his own. Her eyes were closed, which were soon followed by his, as the pair became consumed by the intense bliss they currently felt. Their free hands wrapped around the other's backside, pulling the other as close as possible. They unintentionally held each other tighter as they kept enjoying the feeling of the other's lips against their own, something they previously weren't able to feel whilst imprisoned in the seal. The blissful feeling they were experiencing was something entirely new to them, so they made sure to savor every second of it.

When they finally separated, it left the both of them breathless. Their foreheads pressed together as the two kept holding one another close. The two had to gasp for air, but never did they think it wasn't worth it. They smiled at one another, both of them immensely satisfied as Pandora teased, "Was it that?"

His face became slightly red, a little embarrassed from her tease. It was truly a pure and nice moment that the two of them shared, but the happiness was only temporary as Subaru's mind began to plague him with troubling thoughts once more.

Once again reading his mind, she rubbed her thumb against the back of his hand soothingly, "Everything will be okay, I promise."

He looked into her eyes, genuinely as hopeful as she was determined, "I really hope so..." With that, the two of them stared out into the horizon, their heads still pressed together, as the sun began to rise. It's light began to shine upon them, past and through the few clouds that occupied the sky. A brand new day has just begun.

***Chapter 5*: Dora and Baru**

Heavy notes and exposition about the chapter are at the end this time. Hope you like this chapter and give it a shot, everyone!

Chapter 5: Dora and Baru

The two didn't know how long they'd sat there, watching the sun rise as a new day of their lives began. It was odd, but they felt refreshed at the prospect. To them, the idea of having something similar to a fresh start was occurring and it was an exceptionally appealing concept.

As they snuggled together and looked out into the horizon, they felt as if they could stay together without moving for forever. It wasn't like that concept was new to them by any means, and even though they've already done something similar for much longer than forever, it was still certainly appealing.

Pandora let out a light sigh of bliss, fully content with the position she was currently in. If she was honest, going into that seal with Subaru had been the best thing to ever happen to her in her life. What she gained from that experience was something she could never have hoped to gain anywhere else. In addition, that very same thing brought her more joy than she could have ever hoped to have.

When she looked over at Subaru, who still had his eyes cast out into the distance, she could vaguely see his smile. A small smile, one currently similar to hers, that clearly showed how comfortable he was in this moment. Just looking at his smile brought flutters to her chest, among many other numerous feelings that she couldn't quite pinpoint the meaning of.

All of those new things she was feeling were just so different and unique to her, but she liked each and every one of them. The best part? They were all there because of Subaru. Whenever she thought about him she always felt a delightful feeling swell up in her chest. Now that they were always together, that feeling was amplified even more. She loved every second of it. She loved the way he made her feel when he was with her.

She loved his smile. Every time she saw it, her chest fluttered and made her want to smile too. She loved his voice. The tune of his voice was something like music to her ears; she could listen to him talk all day, if it came to it. She loved how he listened to her so attentively in a conversation, too. Whenever she spoke to him, he always seemed so interested in what she had to say. He always made her feel as if what she had to say mattered to him, and she loved that.

She loved his eyes. One might say that they were nasty-looking, which they were for the most part, but they always conveyed his feelings, especially his worry and care. And, while she hadn't said it to him aloud yet, she really did find his eyes attractive. Above all else, she loved his personality. There was just something about his sense of humor that drew her in; she liked his goofy side when he tended to show it. The way he stayed loyal to those he loved and cared about — which now included her — was also something she came to admire over the eternity they spent together.

She could go on and on about what she loved about him. She had come to acknowledge and embed those positives into her mind during their time together in the seal. It was only after that did she come to realize what love was, what true love felt like. Never had this feeling made itself known to her before, but she had no complaints to have it present now. He loved her and she loved him; that was something she wouldn't dare change for anything.

If someone had told her, years ago, that her thought process would become like this, filled with unconditional love for someone like Subaru, she would have probably

banished them, or killed them, or tortured them. She would admit that she changed a lot, more-so than she could have ever imagined. And to think it was all because she had been tricked into being sealed with a seemingly ordinary boy for an eternity.

She felt a particularly fond emotion rise within her when she recalled the memories of their time in the seal together. It didn't start smoothly; in fact, they had first hated each other for a long time. But, he reached his hand out to her one day. He started to talk to her and, from there, they talked more and more until eventually becoming closer on a mental, emotional and physical level. Eventually that led to their current attachment now, something she couldn't complain about at all. That eternity with her Subaru changed her, in a way she liked to think was for the better.

Looking back on how she used to be, she couldn't help but mentally cringe. In truth, she didn't know how to perceive herself back then in comparison to how she was now. She wanted to think that she was an entirely different person now, with her entire personality having been completely overhauled into what it was now. She so desperately wanted that to be the case; she really liked herself now, after all. Though, was that entirely true? Of course, nothing she felt and acted on now was fake; no, it was all very real to her. But was her old personality completely gone?

As she pondered that question, she felt herself deflate a little as a minor dose of fear rose within her. It would be a lie to say that it was entirely gone. But even so, whatever was left of her old personality was just a minority within her newer self. She could still feel its presence deep inside of her very being — the selfish and sociopathic personality hidden behind a graceful and calm demeanor — but it ultimately was nothing to worry about just yet... or was it?

"Oi, Dora, are you okay? You've been staring at me for a little bit now, you know."

A voice broke her out of her own mind. She had let herself fall into a daze, her eyes still looking straight at Subaru. When she came out of it, her eyes refocused directly into his own.

"I... I am," she responded with a mostly true answer. She made sure to keep her eyes connected to his in order to give him more of a reason to believe her words. Her body seemed to relax itself a little, after it must have unknowingly stiffened up at the prospect of her old personality still existing within her. "I was just reminiscing about how things used to be with us and how much we have changed over time."

Subaru only looked at her with a concerned expression for a little while. He looked into her eyes as if he was studying her. Pandora knew that he must have not completely believed her words. He was a perceptive person and clearly noticed that her body language shifted. She could only hope that he wouldn't delve too much into it, because if he asked her what was wrong then she'd be inclined to be honest with him.

She didn't want to cause him any more worry. It was already bad enough that he was shouldering the blame for what happened to his spirit and everyone else, even though he shouldn't be. If anyone was to blame, it was her. She had hoped that kissing him would help ease his worries and nerves, at least by a little bit. It seemed to have worked, which she was genuinely happy about, so she didn't want to trigger those feelings coming back by telling him about what concerned her.

A sigh came from Subaru's mouth, catching the platinum-haired girl's attention. "Time really can change people," he stated simply, averting his gaze back to the horizon ahead of them.

Pandora followed his gaze, thankful that he didn't pry; though, she was sure that wouldn't stop him from figuring things out eventually. She was glad that she wouldn't have to burden him with her inner turmoil, for now at least. "I suppose it does, doesn't it," she agreed with his statement. "The two of us, especially."

At that, he let out a small yet hearty chuckle. "Yeah, we've both really changed, haven't we..." he trailed off, his gaze shifting downward. Pandora looked at him, her own gaze

now containing the worry and concern that his gaze once had. "Say, Dora, can I ask you something?"

His voice seemed so down, but yet slightly hopeful. She never took her gaze off of him, her eyes and expression morphing into one laced with more seriousness, as she replied, "Anything."

At that, he finally lifted his eyes up to look at her, "Do you think..." he trailed off again. Pandora could only guess as to why, but perhaps he was unsure as to if his question was a logical one or not. "Do you think that you could, uhm... use your Authority to make Beako better? Like make her normal again, so she doesn't have to suffer like that?"

She looked at him understandingly now. Of course he would still be worried about her, she was a fool to think that he would take his mind off of it for very long. She thought for a long moment, debating something within her head, before she answered him, "I can, but I also cannot."

Subaru tilted his head slightly, "What do you mean? Your Authority lets you manipulate reality, right? I thought... that if anyone could do it, it would've been you."

Pandora let out a light sigh, completely understanding his confusion. "My Authority does allow me to manipulate reality, but only to a very specific extent and under certain conditions," she explained honestly. She focused on him, seeing him fully listening to her explanation and waiting for her to continue. "It is more like a manipulation of phenomena around me, instead of just reality. Take the day we first met as an example. You remember when I... got rid of your friends, yes?"

Subaru nodded, signifying that he recalled the event she spoke about. If there were any negative feelings he had about remembering it, he didn't show it in any obvious way. Though, he spoke, "Yeah, I remember. You said that they 'shouldn't be here' before saying that they'd left before we entered that room. Next thing I knew, they were just gone. But couldn't you just do that for Beako? Just say that she never changed!"

Pandora merely shook her head, denying Subaru's logic and statement. Though, she understood that he came to such quick conclusions due to his blatant desperation. "While I understand where your logic stems from, it is not that simple," she said with a neutral expression. He looked into her eyes, and she could clearly see the desperation in them as if it were the daylight sky. She felt bad, terrible even. She did not want him to feel this way; she wanted to help him the best she could. She continued with her explanation: "When I got rid of your friends, I was very specific with the language I used. When I gave the command, I said that they had 'left after the second chamber was unlocked'. Do you recall this?"

He nodded again at her statement, but did not add anything else in addition. The look on his face and emotions in his eyes hadn't changed.

She spoke once again, "This was because, had I said something such as 'they never showed up in the first place' their actions within the dungeon would not have carried over." Seeing Subaru's face slightly shift into an expression of confusion — one which she found kind of cute — she continued, "If I had done that, as an alternative to the command I had actually given, then the knights would have never assisted you in that first trial room. To further clarify, let's say an individual destroyed an entire village. If I were to say that the individual in question had never found the village in the first place, then all of the actions he had taken in the village would cease to exist. Everything he did would be undone. Does that make sense?"

Subaru's expression stayed the same for a moment, before it very slowly started to shift into one of realization and, subsequently, regret. "So... you're saying that if you try to undo things, you'll—"

"If I attempt to undo the spirit's transformation, it would mean to undo all of what she has done," Pandora interrupted, understanding and finishing Subaru's train of thought.

"It would be as if she never absorbed those creatures in the first place. All of the magical power she gained and absorbed over time will be lost. This means that—"

"It means that we never would have been freed from the seal," Subaru, similarly, finished her line of thought for her. "It would create some kind of paradox..."

Pandora nodded, "If that is what it is called, then yes. If I undo what she had done to herself, it is effectively reversing her end result. I do not know if it would even work. This type of scenario has never happened before." She paused, taking a moment to collect her thoughts. Her voice, filled with uncertainty, spoke again, "If... If I were to alter those events, one of two things could happen." They looked into each other's eyes as she spoke, both conveying their emotions clearly through them, "One: it would not work, due to the 'paradox' as you called it. The interference between time and space would be too great even for my authority to change. Or two: it does work, at the cost of her losing the power she has gained and forcing us back into the seal."

They both kept looking at each other, the both of them holding an equal understanding of the implications those two possibilities entailed. Either nothing would happen and everything would be fine, or everything is undone at the cost of them returning to the seal without a way out. A fifty-fifty chance, one that was inherently too risky to even attempt.

"So... I guess there's just nothing we can do, then?" Subaru asked aloud, more-so to himself than to Pandora, as he slightly tilted his head away, silently muttering his musings to himself. It seemed that he still held onto some of his desperation, his mind repeatedly attempting to think of ways to possibly fix the suffering spirit. "Couldn't we... uhm... maybe we can just have her, like, undo her absorption?"

The way he looked at her... all full of the smallest bit of hope he had left. It crushed her to see him in such a way, desperate and grasping at the shortest of straws. She shook her head, her eyes softening, "Unfortunately, that is likely not possible. She mentioned that those beings, upon being absorbed, became entangled with her soul. That is nothing to overlook. I am afraid that something as complicated as that is not something that can just be 'undone'. It is fortunate that she was able to find something to repress most of her physical transformations. And Subaru..." she paused, trying to find the right words to use for her next statement. "Before you come up with something reckless... think about how she would feel about this. She did everything, all of this, for you. Do you not think that she would be upset seeing you this way, as well?"

Subaru only looked at her blankly for a while. She had no more words to say, so she just waited for the inevitable negative reaction to her statement; something which she was not looking forward to seeing. It didn't take long for it to happen, his hands making their way to his eyes in an attempt to cover them. The boy then started to slowly progress into small sobs, which only seemed to get worse by the second.

He knew that she was right. She was completely right and he was completely wrong, right? At this point he was only grasping at the slimmest of possibilities. Things that could very well be impossible to do. And she was right about Beatrice, too. What would she think? Knowing her, she'd probably yell at him and tell him to stop being so stupid. He thought about this as he cried, no end seemingly in sight.

Pandora felt something inside of her crack and break. She hurt him, she made him cry, she did this. She berated herself within her own mind, furious at herself for letting him succumb further into his sadness with her brutal honesty. However, another part of her reasoned that what she did was for the best; that it was better for him to know the truth, rather than be led on by false hope and desperation that could lead to rash and reckless decisions.

Unable to withstand his crying anymore — due to the rising sadness within her from seeing him in such a state — she moved her free arm behind his back and pulled him directly into her chest. It clearly took him by surprise, his sobs pausing for a moment as his face instinctively became red due the position he found himself in. Pandora let herself smile slightly, closing her eyes and using her free hand to rub light circles

around his back. Before long, she moved it behind Subaru's head so she could begin to softly move her fingers through his hair, trying her best to make him feel as comfortable as possible. Then, she suddenly spoke in a soft yet powerful tone, "It is not your fault."

Subaru's breath seemed to hitch at her words, his eyes slowly widening in surprise. It was as if he truly hadn't expected her to utter such words to him. By his reaction alone, he seemed to almost deny her words.

"If anyone is to blame, it is me," she stated simply, her smile never fading and her hand never ceasing its movements. It took a few seconds for Subaru to properly register her statement, pulling himself away from her chest so he could look at her directly, much to her dismay.

He still looked visibly upset, crushed even. Pandora never let her smile falter, though. He started to stutter through small sobs, "W-What are you talking about?" H-How could this-

"Shhh," she shushed him, pressing the index finger of her free hand to his lips. "Please, do not try to make me innocent. Had I not shown up, tried to make you join me, threatened you and your friends... this would never have happened. So please, do not blame yourself."

Subaru looked at her pointedly for a moment, almost ready to argue against her words with his own. But, as he observed the look on her face for a while, he saw the unyielding resolve planted within her expression. The smile she displayed was not just something to comfort him, it was reassurance as well. A reassurance to all of her words. Subaru knew that if he tried to argue against her, he would lose. She simply would not let him deny it.

He started to shift his eyes away from her, guiltily. "That's not fair..." he mumbled, clearly unhappy with the current turn of events. He wanted to argue, fight with her about what she said, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Was it because she was right? Was it because he truly had nothing to argue for, or against?

Unexpectedly he heard her let out a small giggle, which was followed by a hand cupping his cheek. His head, and subsequently his gaze, was then lightly lifted upward. He saw the look on her face: a sincere and caring smile and eyes full of love for him. Her thumb wiped away a few of his tears, the soft and comforting feeling of her hand finally becoming more apparent to him.

She closed the distance between them, lightly pressing their foreheads against one another. From there, she closed the distance further until their bodies were closer together. They could feel each other's breath, with Subaru's having more of a ragged motion due to his sobbing and Pandora's having a more calm steadiness to it. Subaru focused on her steady breath and used it to help settle his own.

The two stayed pressed against one another for a while longer. They could vaguely feel the heat of the rising sun, but they were too focused on themselves to properly register it. Subaru himself was trapped within his own mind, thinking about everything. While he still moderately blamed himself, he couldn't find it within himself to argue against Pandora's argument. Was that what she wanted? Did she want him to agree with her; to say it was completely her fault? Well, too bad, he wasn't going to do that because, despite her points being valid, he was still the one who had trapped them in the seal. He still, despite having other possible options, deliberately chose to seal them away and he held onto that fact as his reasoning.

"It's... It's still my fault," he found the courage to quietly mutter out. He felt her twitch, confirming that she had heard him correctly. They ended up moving their heads away from one another, Subaru being much calmer now, so they could clearly make eye contact. "I know that you're really trying to help and make me feel better, but the fact that I'm at fault too is undeniable," he stopped talking to take a breath. "I didn't have to seal us away, but I chose to do it anyway. Among the other possible options I had, I

panicked and... well, you know..." he finally finished presenting his logic, his voice low and quiet as he trailed off.

She looked at him without change for a few seconds, before letting out a heavy sigh. Her mouth opened to speak, her voice soft and light, "I know that, no matter how much I may try, you will not change your view on this." He nodded, confirming her words. Similarly to how Subaru felt, she found herself unable to find the will to argue against him. Her eyes suddenly filled with resolve and certainty, something that Subaru did not fail to notice. To her, there was only one way out of this predicament now. "Let us make a compromise," she suddenly suggested, prompting him to look at her in minor confusion before she spoke again. "Let us share the burden of fault between us, okay?"

The wind seemed to pick up after she declared those words. It blew her hair a bit, enough for it to move slightly in correspondence to the wind. When Subaru looked at her face, her expression, he could read all of the emotions laced within. Those emotions and feelings were not something he wanted to deny. So, he inevitably let out a breath, followed closely by a small smile, "Alright, fine. We're both the pieces of shit that caused this mess, then. Are you happy now?"

She smiled too. Although she didn't like how he still put the blame onto himself, she was at least thankful that they had come to a compromise and ended their rounds of self-blame. She could only hope that, with the blame equally shared between them, they could move on and look ahead. She didn't want him to be sad and hold himself back by something that couldn't be changed. That is what she was doing her best to do too, after all. "Yes, I am happy. Thank you, Subaru."

He let himself chuckle a little, "Anytime, Dora."

Her expression shifted to one of minor confusion. She slightly raised a brow and dipped her head a little bit to the side, "That does remind me. I have noticed that you start to refer to me by that name now. What does it mean?"

Subaru looked at her, his smile becoming bigger at the prospect of being asked about the name he had given her. "Oh, it's just a cute nickname I thought of for you! It's just a shortened version of your name, though," he started to move himself restlessly into different types of poses and positions as he rambled, something which Pandora quite honestly found cute. "I thought about calling you 'Panda' at first, which would compare you to a cute and cuddly creature from my homeworld, but I ended up just choosing 'Dora' instead. I thought that, I dunno, it sounded better, I guess."

Seeing him ramble and seem so happy with himself made her happy. She wasn't afraid to let him see her happy, either. Pandora started giggling at first, but soon enough it evolved into full-on laughter. It wasn't the kind of laughter that would insinuate mockery, or insanity for that matter, rather it showed how amused and happy she was.

Subaru, however, didn't quite see that at first, "Huh? What are you laughing at? Do you not like it?! I can think of a new one if-"

"No, no!" She exclaimed, her laughter starting to die down little by little. She started to shake her head rapidly in a desperate attempt to convey that he had the wrong idea. Eventually, her head shakes and laughs settled down enough for her to look at him, a large smile on her face. "I love it," she put her free hand over her heart. "I am just... really happy."

Subaru felt like he'd go blind at any second. The pure beauty of this sight was something far too great for his mortal eyes to behold. Her pale skin, platinum hair and pure genuine smile seemed to reflect the light from the sun, and right into his eyes no less. His heart — and eyes — couldn't take it.

Pandora meanwhile, as Subaru tried to keep himself together, felt endless internal bliss and happiness. Never had someone called her by such a loving nickname before. Her

heart raced and she could barely keep her feelings in order. She couldn't help herself with what she requested next: "Say it again."

Subaru snapped out of his own thoughts at that moment. His eyes refocused onto her, only to once more see the beaming smile plastered on her face accompanied with eyes that essentially pleaded with him to fulfill her desire. In addition, she seemed to have leaned forward and closer to him in great anticipation.

Once his mind fully registered these facts, he let himself smile with amusement, "Dora."

As if something struck her in the chest, she flew back in a dramatic fashion, something very similar to what he may have done. It made him chuckle. He quite enjoyed her antics, especially when they were inspired by his own. When she leaned forward again, her face held an expression more akin to smugness laced with some mischievousness, yet to him it was cute all the same. She playfully winked at him as she teased, "Hehe... if you gave me such a cute nickname, then I must come up with one for you as well."

Subaru was unexpectedly thrown back when the girl pressed herself up against him. She held him affectionately, likely trying to express her happiness physically in addition to her words, with the same look on her face. In a way, Subaru was dumbfounded at her behavior. If anyone, literally anyone, that knew how Pandora normally acted saw this, they'd immediately claim that she was an imposter or something. The actions thus being taken by the Witch of Vainglory currently were so uncharacteristic to her past personality that it was like looking at a completely new person.

Though, that was only more proof to show how much she changed, wasn't it? Pandora herself clearly acknowledged and relished in the fact that she was different, taking advantage of it in every way possible. As a matter of fact, Pandora had actually started to become this way while the two had been trapped together in the seal. Some time after their hands had come together for the first time, her personality took quite a major shift and it was all completely directed at him. She became almost happier, more cheerful, in a way and he could see it very clearly through their near constant conversation. In addition, he noticed that she had also become clingy to him in physical, emotional and mental ways.

Of course, the same changes had come to apply to him as well. He had become happier around her and had come to cling to her as much as she did to him. Once they were released, however, Subaru felt himself decline back into a state of depression and self-loathing, similar to how he had been after his initial arrival in the seal. This was particularly driven by his new surroundings and the painful truths of what occurred due to his reckless actions. So, while he still, without an ounce of doubt, held a deep feeling of love and affection for Pandora, his depressed state didn't exactly motivate him to act out on it as much as he would otherwise.

He was unsure as to whether Pandora had reverted into a similar state as him, but her actions proved that she seemingly hadn't. Since the very moment she had awoken, while she seemed a bit less expressive, her willingness to be close and cling to him was majorly prominent. In fact, it seemed to have become more apparent now that they were completely alone together. Subaru had to wonder, was she holding herself back because Beatrice was around? Was she embarrassed? Or was she only doing this to make him happy?

Subaru kept looking at the girl who was now humming thoughtfully in his lap, swaying her head a little bit to each side as she thought. Her composure seemed to have been completely replaced by this happy-go-lucky character instead. Was this really her? He had doubted it at one point. Logic stipulated that it was. The Pandora he had first met was gone, having evolved into someone much more eccentric and affectionate toward him.

Subaru, honestly, didn't know why the change had been so drastic. He knew that, prior to her developed feelings for him, she never experienced anything akin to love or true happiness. So, Subaru considered that perhaps her actions were born out of pure

genuinity; that she was acting like this because she was embracing all of the new and unique emotions she came to possess.

When she looked up with him, a beaming smile still present on her face, Subaru let his doubt start to wash away. Her smile, her look and her eyes were all genuine. Her actions and her desire to help him was of genuine concern and love. There was simply no way to mistake that. Why had he doubted it, anyway? Was it because he hated himself; or because he found the idea of someone loving him as purely and genuinely as this hard to believe? Ironically, he wanted to hit himself. Doubting such a thing would be to insult the eternity they spent together. The eternity in which they struggled, overcoming many of the invisible obstacles that held them back, and let their mutual love be born and grow.

A louder hum from the girl stole his attention. When he refocused on her, he saw a new expression of minor eagerness and anticipation take form on her face. She seemed pretty excited, he thought. Though, after she realized the rather odd and carefree actions she did, she took herself back from him a little bit to recompose herself. Now, while the distance between them was still close, she looked at him from the front, in contrast to from his lap, at an equal eye level. Her posture became more composed and stiff, as if she were attempting to hold herself back from acting so indiscriminately with him again. Was she nervous, perhaps? Or was she just trying to keep her 'composed and calm' image and utterly failing at it?

When her mouth began to open and Subaru heard her voice, it was confirmed to him that her physical composure betrayed her true feelings, "Baru. I like Baru. Though it is only a shortened version of your name, like the one you gave to me."

It was as if an angel had blessed his ears with its voice. Her voice felt so angelic and resonated with his soul, all the while carrying the bliss and happiness she truly felt with it directly into his heart. And, oh man, wasn't she just so cute right now, Subaru thought.

It took him a little bit to realize that she had gone silent, her eyes drilling into him with seemingly nervous anticipation. Suddenly he felt guilty for making her wait like that, he smiled and started to tell her his honest thoughts, "I like it a lot! No, I actually love it!" His exclamation came accompanied with a small, yet still dramatic pose that only Subaru himself was known to pull off (and maybe Beatrice on a good day). He settled down fairly quickly, proceeding with his compliments, "I think it's great to have our names be so simple and similar! It connects us in a way, doesn't it?"

Pandora, who was actually stunned a bit due to Subaru's confident exclamation, looking at him with wide eyes. Her mouth, which was slightly agape in some form of surprise, had quickly shifted to that of a genuinely happy smile.

"Ah, cute..." she heard him mutter under his breath whilst scratching his cheek with this free hand. Her previous expression vanished in an instant, replaced by one of slight shock and a red blush. Her being so unmistakingly pale didn't help the matter, since it only made her blush more prominent. Subaru noticed her change in expression and make-up choice, quickly growing concerned, "Oi, Dora, are you okay?"

Subaru had been ready to ask a million questions, to see if she was alright and identify what he had done wrong. He knew that she wasn't particularly used to compliments either; even when they were in the seal, he had not complimented her too often, nor she him for that matter, because their relationship wasn't mainly conveyed that way. So, was that it? Was she just not used to it, or did he actually say something she didn't like? But he had little time to formulate such questions, however, since before he could even begin to start asking them, he felt an arm wrap around him and a body-mass tackle him. "Baruuu~"

She was snuggling him. This really reinforced everything he thought about her before, didn't it? The position he was currently in felt so natural and comfortable to him, yet at the same time it felt weird. This girl was supposed to be the infamous Witch of Vainglory. Witch of Vainglory. Witch. Of. Vainglory. Said Witch was currently snuggling

him in a tight embrace, rubbing her cheek affectionately along his very unimpressive chest. By that standard, was she really that Witch anymore? Or was this just Pandora, a normal girl that fell in love?

Subaru found himself starting to smile, his own arm returning the embrace. He let himself become engulfed in the comfortable feeling, as the two pleasantly snuggled together. It was peaceful...

...for approximately twenty-three seconds.

The wind picked up again, hitting them directly with a cool breeze. It hit hard enough to take them out of their relaxing silence, but what followed was even worse. Both of them, simultaneously, sniffed the air, before recoiling with haste. They both covered their noses in an instant, looking at one another with horrified expressions.

"How did we not realize that-"

"-we contained such a horrid smell."

Subaru had started and Pandora finished. It was then mutually and silently decided that they both needed a bath. They, somehow, hadn't even realized how bad they smelt. The both of them wondered why Beatrice hadn't told them, and how in Od Laguna they didn't realize themselves sooner. However, they wasted no time on such insignificant thoughts and instead focused their time on getting to the bath. Soon enough, they stood directly outside the bathroom doorway.

Though that's where another problem arose. Well, for poor Subaru at least.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!" He yelled, dramatically moving his body in correlation to his words. He looked down to his left, where the shorter, platinum-haired girl stood looking up at him with an expression of minor confusion. "How is this going to work?!"

She tilted her head up at him, clearly still confused as to what he was talking about, "What do you mean, Baru?"

He quickly raised their conjoined hands in front of their eyes, "This! Don't you think this is... well, a problem?!"

Her expression failed to change. Still just as confused as she was before he answered her, she asked, "Why would it be a problem? I like holding your hand. Do you not like it?"

He immediately started to shake his head rapidly to each side, his free arm following in similar motions, "No, no, no! That's not it at all!" When he stopped shaking his head and arm, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before letting it out in the form of a long sigh.

"Baru, what is wrong? Your face is all red."

He deadpanned at her, "Dora, listen." He took a deep breath, before using whatever willpower he could muster to begin his explanation, "We're about to go into the bath. Together. We'll, uh... be exposed, you know?"

While Subaru was desperately trying to convey the issue at hand, Pandora still couldn't see the problem he was talking about. She raised an eyebrow at him, "Exposed?"

At that, Subaru let out a groan. He was so desperately trying to convey the problem without being so direct, but it seems as though he had little choice now. He was really not looking forward to it. With full-on embarrassment, he began, "You know, we'll both be n-naked in there, right?"

"So? It is nothing we both haven't seen before."

Her immediate reply threw him back, both metaphorically and literally. He really did not expect that answer at all. It messed with his head, just a little bit. "I know that! But that was when we couldn't physically, erm- react and feel things. This is different!"

His whole body was practically trembling, lips quivering and eyes full of desperation. Pandora only looked at him with a face of neutrality, which at first fueled his hope. But then his hopes were utterly crushed when her face changed, her mouth curving upward and her eyes momentarily shining. Her gasp on his hand tightened as she quickly began to lead him into the room. "Then I suppose we will have to take care of that."

"...Nani? Now hold on just a second here. Wait, wait, wait, wait-"

Subaru let out a lengthy, and quite frankly heavy, sigh as he sunk himself further into the water. His mouth was now submerged in the water, his eyes glancing to his left. There she sat, eyes closed and submerged similarly to him. They were both completely and utterly embarrassed.

Contrary to what one might think, nothing actually happened between the two of them. Physically, anyway; mentally was a completely different story. When Pandora dragged him into the bathroom, she didn't exactly waste much time in trying to get undressed. Though, there was a problem: she was wearing a cloth that had to go over her arms to get off. And, with the both of them unwilling to separate their hands, Pandora just chose to rip it off, much to Subaru's dismay.

Needless to say, Subaru was a blushing mess. Yes, they had seen each other in their birthday suits whilst in the seal, but it was done as a futile attempt to make them physically feel something. Quite literally, any physical stimulation in there was null and void. Now though, he was sitting ducks.

What he didn't expect, though, was for Pandora's behavior to suddenly flip on its head. Whatever confidence she had previously displayed vanished, replaced with what seemed to be pure embarrassment as the girl's face flushed red. He would have found it amusing if his turn wasn't next. Pulling down his pants never felt so difficult.

After that, neither of them actually looked at the other's nether regions for longer than necessary. Actually, the two of them did sneak a peak or two as they got into the bath itself, which didn't exactly help them at all. Luckily, they didn't have to worry about 'physical stimulation' for too long since, after they had gotten into the bath, the water blanketed what was underneath it enough to obscure direct sight. It gave them time to calm themselves down and unwind.

Eventually, the two settled themselves enough to actually relax. As the warm water covered them, they finally let themselves ease into the snug and pleasant feeling of the bath. They stayed that way for a while, basking in the comfortable silence they rested in. It was nice, peaceful even. The two felt like they could rest in the same way for another eternity.

As they relaxed, Subaru had ended up directing his gaze up toward the ceiling. A thought had presented itself within his mind and it was something he had come to think about. Not having come to a conclusion on his own, he decided to ask his current bath-mate, "Dora, what are we?"

At that, she raised herself from the ester a bit, opening her eyes and looking at him. He similarly moved his own gaze to meet hers, her confusion obvious to him at first glance, so before she could ask him what he meant Subaru spoke again:

"Relationship-wise, what are we? I mean, we love each other, that's for sure, but we never really established what our official relationship status is."

She hummed thoughtfully at the notion, she herself unsure as to how she should answer. Eventually, she did give him her honest opinion, "Do we require a relationship like that? I believe that the love we share is enough, do you not agree?"

"I do entirely," he confirmed, looking at her with an expression of seriousness to affirm his sentiment. "It's just something I was thinking about. Like, how far does it go? I feel like just being 'boyfriend and girlfriend' would be too small for what we have. Are we, like, a married couple?"

She tilted her head slightly, as if questioning him silently. He sweatdropped at her deadpan, wondering what exactly was going through her head. Luckily he didn't have to worry about the girl's thoughts for too long, "I believe we have something much more significant than that. Something beyond that of a sworn marriage. We are... eternal partners."

"Eternal partners?"

"Yes. I just came up with it, do you like it?"

Subaru resisted the urge to chuckle as the girl looked at him for an answer. "I like it, don't worry."

Pandora closed her eyes, satisfied with the response she received, "I am happy to hear that."

Subaru would admit, he did like the sound of it. While 'Eternal Partners' didn't exactly sound the best, it did fit them perfectly. He'd rather have a more symbolic and meaningful name, one which was unique to the two of them, rather than one that was ordinary or just sounded nice and rolled off the tongue.

They were silent again for a few moments, the silence only breaking when Subaru spoke again. "Say, Dora."

"Yes, Baru?"

"I love you."

She smiled, "I love you too."

The two of them ended up reverting back into the relaxing silence they relished in before. They closed their eyes and, whether they realized it or not, drew closer to one another until their arms made contact. At first, it felt oddly nice, natural even. However, Subaru quickly widened his eyes in realization at the reminder of something.

"Say, Dora."

"Yes, Baru?"

"How are we going to handle getting out of here?"

She couldn't answer that question.

Tada! Here I am, at the end of the story instead of the start! Oooo, spooky. Anyway, I thought for this chapter in particular that it would be better to put my exposition at the bottom. Speaking of which, prepare yourselves for some exposition!

I had a lot of doubts with this chapter, at first. It made it harder for me to write because I was unsure as to how it would be received, however ultimately I decided to just tell the story.

This chapter focuses on both Pandora and Subaru's character and shows you, the audience, how much the two of them have changed, especially around each other. Pandora's exposition at the start of the chapter should cover her enough, but I'll do a small clarification. Yes, she's different from how she 'normally' is. The reasons as to why she's like that are explained, or should be obvious. Though, I do wonder if she's all there, hm?

For Subaru, his changes are a little less obvious. It may seem like he's still himself, which he still does indeed hold a lot of his old personality, but his overall behavior and actions are definitely... well, different. Why did Pandora seemingly change more than Subaru did, you ask? Well, that answer mostly has to do with her feelings. You got a glimpse of that in this chapter, and if you didn't fully understand it here you definitely will soon enough.

And in case anyone says "why did they just get over everything so quickly," I'll just say now that, no, they didn't. I'm not going to go in depth as to why or how they didn't, but just know that even though they're distracting themselves with other things doesn't mean they've gotten over it. It'll always be eating away at the back of their minds until the issues come up again.

Anyway, on unrelated notes, this chapter, I think, marks the halfway point of the story. Overall I can picture around 4-5 chapters left to do (length to be determined) of the main story before I reach the end and start my next project.

However, there are things that I'd like to ask for your opinions on. I was thinking of doing a... well, R-Rated scene between the two of them. I don't really know whether or not to put it as a special, optional chapter within this story or make an entirely new one-shot story centered around that scene alone. I was thinking of doing the latter so that this story doesn't become tainted with such a thing, but you guys can decide.

Additionally, I was thinking of making special chapters when the main story ends, featuring Subaru and Pandora's time in the seal. It would include what you'd expect it to, of course. I just figured that, since I keep referencing their time there together that it would be neat to possibly expand on that. Again, let me know your thoughts.

Hope you enjoyed it, everyone! See you next chapter!

***Chapter 6*: To The Future**

I want to apologize for the delay. This chapter, in some areas, was particularly irritating to write. I found myself second guessing some things, rewriting, and ultimately being unsatisfied with a lot of things, especially in the first half. Hell, this chapter was supposed to have more content, but I felt like there was too much here already. I think this is a lot better, and I'm somewhat comfortable with this. So, yeah, I hope this is adequate enough to accommodate for the delay.

Also, yes, apparently 'amiright' is a word. Yes, this is relevant.

More notes at the end. Hope you all enjoy.

Chapter 6: To The Future

Subaru and Pandora, after realizing how much they'd messed up, sat together silently in the bath. The atmosphere was comfortable yet a little awkward, with neither of them sure as to what they should do. They even delayed their time of exiting the bath due to the sheer embarrassment they both felt.

Now, what was this predicament they found themselves in? The two, after finding out that they carried such a horrid stench, had rushed to take a bath. However, they had run off without properly considering some essential things, like the pair of love-struck idiots that they were.

So, now, the two soaked together in a bath full of awkwardness. It was mostly due to the fact that they were both completely bare for the other to gawk at if they so desire. In the back of their minds they considered it as something nice, or something that they could potentially be happy about. Hell, they both secretly held out a bit of hope that the other would look. Did that stop the embarrassment they felt, though? No, no it did not. Other than embarrassment being a natural human response to being nude in front of someone, they each had their own personal reasons for it too.

For Pandora, she personally had never been put into this type of situation before. It was ironic, in a sense. She always used to dress in just a simple cloth that went over herself. No more, no less. That's what she wore for the past hundreds of years of her life, never once feeling embarrassed or insecure about herself for it. Oh, how it all felt so different now. Being completely exposed next to Subaru, the person she cared for the most, was terrifying to her.

Normally, people always fawned over her looks. When normal people looked at her, they immediately saw something gorgeous, beautiful, extravagant... but Subaru wasn't like a normal person. He didn't get affected by her appearance like normal people did, which was something she loved but yet at the same time felt concerned about. Him not being enthralled by her looks only made her consider — what people would say are — normal girl issues. Like, what would he say or think about her? Would he not like the way she looks? Does he like girls with bigger chests? Bigger butts? She had none of those qualities; in fact, she was as flat as a board on all fronts.

For a moment, she stopped thinking about those things. She suddenly felt silly. Why was she so afraid, really? This was Subaru, *her* Subaru, that she was talking about. Their pledged love to one another went beyond that of the normal scope of just any normal couple, going as far as to be labeled as 'Eternal Partners' due to their shared experiences together. She was being paranoid for no reason. She loved him, and he loved her. He would love and accept her for how she is, just as she would for him. That was something she firmly believed in.

As Pandora started to smile in her newfound resolve, her mind beginning to wander onto other things, Subaru was panicking in his own mind. The raven-haired, nasty-eyed boy was embarrassed because of his insecurities more than anything else. His body

wasn't something anyone would particularly gawk at; in fact, it could be labeled as undesirable to most people. Subaru's figure was average, at best, with little to no muscle backing him up. The only thing he really had going for him was his slim, moderately fit figure, but as it was it was still nothing impressive. Among other things, Subaru felt that his body was just too inadequate to make her happy.

After a while, he started to think that, perhaps, it was idiotic to think so negatively; after all, she had seen him in his entirety before. However, those were also under different circumstances. Who's to say that her opinion hasn't changed, or whether she'd even be satisfied with him now?

He mentally brought himself out of the negativity hole that he was falling into. Why was he being so negative? That kind of self-doubt was something everyone disliked about him, including Pandora herself. Why was he even doubting things in the first place? The more he considered it, the more he realized that he had little to nothing to fear at all. Pandora, before they'd even gotten into the bath, seemed completely willing to see him in his entirety and vice versa. After everything she'd done for him already, there was nothing to doubt about her feelings regarding any part of him anymore, including his body.

At that, Subaru joined Pandora in smiling. The two both became completely confident in their conclusions, as if they had reached the same mental wavelength. They trusted each other to the fullest, unwilling to ever let that be doubted again.

The two collapsed into each other as comfortably as they could, basking in the silence of each other's company. The feeling of just simply being alone together without talking or doing anything was something that just simply could never get old to them.

However, their comfortable silence didn't last for long. Their extended time in the bath had produced some rather uncomfortable side effects. The water, which had previously felt warm, was now seeming cold to the touch with their skin beginning to wrinkle in some areas, a clear result of being soaked in the water for too long.

At that moment, the two turned their heads to look at each other. Mutual understanding presented itself on both of their faces, and without wasting much time the two of them climbed out of the bath that they resided in. They hurriedly made their way to the dressing room, both of them grabbing a towel and wrapping it around themselves the best they could before they became too distracted.

As the two started to dry themselves off, they sat themselves on a small bench in the room. Both of them were a bit red in the face for having just gone through another embarrassing ordeal. Despite the confidence they had in the other's opinion, it didn't quite ease the natural embarrassment they felt. They'd have to talk about everything at some point, though.

After some time, when the two felt dry enough, they encountered their next issue: they had absolutely nothing to change into. Pandora had already completely tore up her old piece of 'clothing', and Subaru's old clothes stank of the stench he had before.

With no other options, the two opted to venture out into the mansion in nothing but their towels in search of optimal clothing. Subaru figured that their best bet would be to head to his and Beatrice's room, where there should be at least something for him to wear in there. Unless Beatrice went through the closet and got rid of a bunch of his clothes, that is. For Pandora, he figured that, at least for the time being, he could just lend her some of his clothes until they could get something more suited for her. That's all he could really think to do with no other viable options present within the mansion itself.

Eventually, after a quite lengthy and embarrassing trek through the mansion, the two found themselves back at the very same room they had woken up in. Subaru slowly cracked open the door, peeking inside to the best of his ability. The last thing they wanted was to end up walking in on Beatrice while both he and Pandora were only wrapped in a towel. After scanning the room a few times and being completely sure that the coast was clear, he opened the door fully and led Pandora inside.

After closing the door behind them, the two went over to the closet in search of something to wear. When Subaru opened the door, he found himself surprised by the sheer amount of tracksuits that hang within. They all looked nice, clean and completely identical.

At first he found himself confused. He only had one tracksuit, that much was certain, so why would there be more than one? He pondered on the idea for a little while, only ever reaching one plausible conclusion, "Ah, Beako..." he trailed off, shaking his head with a small smile on his face. "You should have told me you practiced making clothes for me. I'm so proud of you!"

He spoke his thoughts aloud, grabbing at his original — or what he believed was his original — tracksuit with his free hand. He felt the material of that one, then felt the material of the rest. They all felt and looked the same. He remembered her mentioning that she made clothing for herself while he was in the seal, but she didn't mention anything about this. Subaru wondered if the spirit girl was just using his tracksuit for practice, or whether she was preparing this for his return.

He mentally shrugged off the thought, taking one of them off the rack. It hardly mattered now, but he still appreciated the extra sets. He'd be sure to thank her later.

Subaru's gaze shifted over to Pandora, who was looking at his many tracksuit copies with invested eyes. At that moment, Subaru wasn't quite sure of what she was thinking. "Dora, do you mind if I get changed?"

She quickly looked at him, her face slightly tinted in red. She nodded at him in confirmation before directing her gaze down to their conjoined hands in a questioning manner. Subaru followed her shifted gaze, him too now looking at their hands in thought. The same question made itself known to both of their minds; how would they get dressed with their hands together?

It didn't take Subaru long to come up with an idea, one that subsequently made his face turn a slight shade of red. Pandora noticed this sudden change, drifting her gaze up to him again with a concerned look. "Say, Dora," he started, his voice conveying how unsure he was. "I have an idea, is it alright if I test it?"

She just sort of blinked her eyes at him for a few seconds, slightly confused. Why did he sound so unsure and nervous? In a way, it made her feel the same way. She could only give him another nod in approval.

With that approval, Subaru, suddenly without any verbal warning, put his foot on top of hers while decoupling their hands at the same time. The sudden new form of contact made her let out a slight yelp, clearly not having expected it. Subaru let out a nervous chuckle, thinking the noise she made was cute, "Sorry, Dora. My idea was to see if our... problem could be solved through any kind of direct physical contact." He looked down at said new form of physical contact, "And, uh... looks like it worked."

She looked down too. She supposed that it was a good thing to find out now as opposed to later. She looked away, her gaze now directed back to the closet. "S'fine," she gave a slight pout as he looked back up at her. "Just warn me next time, Baru."

He lightly chuckled at her behavior, promising to next time warn her before he did something like that again. She smiled at him, satisfied with his answer as the two refocused on the clothes inside of the closet. Pandora's mind started to drift away again as she stared ahead of her, all while Subaru went back to deciding which tracksuit to put on.

A lot of thoughts were going through her head at that moment. However, they mainly consisted of how she felt about this new discovery. In all honesty, her feelings were a bit out of control; all she really knew was that it felt *weird*. This particular type of physical contact just felt weird to her in a way she was unable to explain, even to herself. Was it because it was new, or was there more to it? She could feel her body tingle, her heart beat faster and her face heat up as she focused on it more and more.

Pandora only snapped out of it when Subaru noisily took one of his tracksuit sets off of the rack. He was leaning quite far forward to reach it, too. She supposed that, while the new form of contact freed their hands, it didn't do much for mobility. Even though it made her sad, she found it necessary to talk to Subaru about their situation. Having to be in constant direct physical contact with each other at all times could quickly become a hindrance, as it already was to some extent now.

She found herself studying his face and body movements, looking to see if he was visibly showing any signs of feeling anything similar to how she was. Unfortunately for her, he seemed to be completely fine. It made her think; was something wrong with her? She would have to talk to him about that later, too.

The best thing she could do now was get her mind off of the new feeling, so that is what she strived to do. She refocused her mind to the thoughts she was having before, her gaze similarly refocusing onto Subaru's many sets of tracksuits.

Subaru slipped his tracksuit jacket on, zipping it up all the way before triumphantly putting his hands on his hips, "Ah, now this just feels better." Even though he still hadn't put on any undergarments or the tracksuit bottoms — something which the towel still covered — it still felt comfortable to him. He began to turn to Pandora, "Say, Dora, I don't think you've seen me in my outfit from home yet, what do you- hm, what're you staring at?"

He cut himself off once he realized that Pandora was blankly staring into the closet. He followed her gaze, but couldn't determine what she wanted or was thinking about at first. He looked back at her, then back to the closet again before he understood. He smiled to himself, amused in a sense, as he leaned back into the closet and took out another tracksuit set, something which caught her eye. When he handed it out to her, she finally fully snapped out of it.

"Go on, try it on," Subaru insisted, gesturing to the set in his hand. Pandora looked at him, seeing his merry and encouraging smile before looking back down at the tracksuit set in his hand. With a slight bit of red on her face, she took it into her right hand as her left started to undo the towel around her body.

Subaru immediately redirected his gaze. His action proved to have been just in time, as he heard the sound of the towel hitting the floor. She may have felt confident in revealing herself to him, but he was not ready or in any way prepared for it yet. His face turned red as he heard her fiddle with the jacket, keeping it turned even as he heard the zipper go up.

"Baru, how do I look?" He heard an angelic sounding voice speak to him. Subaru, now knowing she was covered, turned his head back to face her. His mouth went agape, his eyes widened and his face reddened itself even more.

In front of him, Pandora wore the tracksuit jacket he had given her. It was a little too big for her; the sleeves slightly went over her hands, which were pulling down at the bottom of the jacket to keep her under area covered. She hadn't bothered to zip it up all the way, the zipper itself resting just below her breasts. This caused Subaru to unwillingly be able to see the sides of them. He had a feeling that she had done it on purpose, just for that reason. When he directed his gaze up toward her face, he noticed that her cheeks held a light blush and that she displayed a playful smile which rested comfortably on her face. When he met her eyes with his, she playfully winked at him.

Subaru, at that moment, believed that this girl was going to kill him just with her antics. He could never deny how attractive and cute she was, but he mentally couldn't take it. So, whilst slightly averting his gaze, he leaned forward with his hands out and grabbed the zipper of her jacket. From there, he pulled it up all the way for her, much to her silent disappointment.

After that minor debacle, the two conjoined their hands again. With their upper halves dressed, they now needed to dress the bottom. This proved to be a lot less of a problem as initially believed. Subaru simply just slipped on his undergarments and his

tracksuit bottoms, with Pandora doing similar. It was a bit irritating to do with just one hand, but the two of them had done it quickly enough and without any kind of other distraction.

Currently, the two found themselves seated on the bed, Subaru's left hand joined to Pandora's right. They sat in relative silence, which helped the two relax and collect their thoughts more comfortably. With their previous situation sorted, both of them thought that it was best to start addressing some other things.

Subaru found the courage to start speaking first, his head turning toward her, "Hey, Dora." Upon hearing him call her by her new nickname, she too turned her head toward him. "How do you feel about... well, this," he lifted their conjoined hands to provide reference to it in conjunction to his statement.

At that, Pandora knew that Subaru was thinking similarly to how she had been before. When she quickly studied his expression, she could see the bits of nervousness and lack of certainty within it. Pandora could guess that the reason lay in the possible result of both of their feelings, so she began to give him her honest opinion, "I enjoy holding your hand, Baru. I love the feeling of knowing that you are right here next to me at all times." She gave it a minor squeeze to show her sincerity, something he appreciated. She continued, "However, I will not disagree that it is and will continue to be a hindrance."

Subaru nodded, seemingly agreeing with her. He didn't verbally respond right away, though. If they continued as such, even living their lives normally could be a bit of a problem. For example: using the bathroom, or other mundane everyday tasks in life. If they had to stay in contact during everything, it would do more harm than good in the long run.

He took some time to consider what they could possibly do to help with the problem. Having not reached any type of conclusion, he decided to ask Pandora for her opinion: "Do you think we can do anything about it?"

She hummed thoughtfully. She considered the prospect seriously to herself for a few moments before responding, "I truthfully do not know. I have never personally experienced this before, nor have I had connections to anyone that did."

He chuckled a little, "Yeah, same here." They went silent again for a while, neither of them sure of what to say in addition to the conversation. Truthfully, the two of them were lost on what to do. Neither of them knew or had any clue of what could even be done to help themselves with their problem.

However, Subaru had a thought; one in which he doubted, so he decided to ask Pandora for her opinion once more, "Do you think we could maybe train ourselves to get over it?" His sudden suggestion caught Pandora's attention. "Like, training our body and mind to get used to not being connected all the time?" He then rapidly shook his head, turning away as if he were ashamed of suggesting such a thing, "No, never mind. That's stupid."

His notion made Pandora think, seriously considering the possibility. Truthfully, she didn't know if that was even how it worked, or if it was even possible. Though, it couldn't hurt to try, right? "Actually, Baru, I think it could perhaps work." Her face changed to a questioning expression as she slightly tilted her head to the side, "Would you like to give it a try?"

He looked back at her, slightly surprised. But after he collected his thoughts together, it didn't take long for Subaru to reply, "As long as you're willing."

Pandora nodded, signifying that she was very much okay with it. She was the one to suggest that they try, after all. The two climbed further onto the bed until they reached the center, sitting in opposite spots that allowed them to face one another in a cross-legged position. They held their conjoined hands out in front of them, prepared to separate them once they were ready.

Both of them understood what they were trying to do and how they were going to try handling it, but that didn't stop the nervous feeling from creeping up inside of them. Both of them knew what it felt like to be separated; the feeling was not pleasant at all. In a sense, it made them slightly afraid. Despite that, after a few more moments of silent preparation, the two only nodded to one another as a signal to begin. Simultaneously they separated their hands, no longer in any kind of direct contact with each other.

For the first few seconds, they didn't feel much of any difference. However, once those few precious seconds were up, the changes in their bodies hit fast and hard. They could feel their heart rate increase, the temperature rising, their breaths become heavier and the unsteady shaking of their forms. The feeling of panic made itself immensely known to the both of them, unrivaled to anything else.

The two of them did their best to quell that feeling. They tried to mentally reassure themselves as much as they could. Thoughts like, "He/She is right in front of you, don't panic, you're okay," flowed through their minds constantly. It did little to ease them of their suffering, however, as their conditions only worsened with each passing second. The bed itself even started to squeak and move due to their constant shaking and movement. On top of that, it was getting increasingly hard to breathe as they felt themselves start to become lightheaded. Eventually, the panic and feeling of imminent death became so bad that the two simultaneously reached for the other's hands.

When their hands joined together, the effects of their condition began to steadily subside. They began to become more aware of their heavy breaths and the feeling of their hearts pounding against their chests. They loosened their respective grips on the bed sheet, something which they'd unconsciously done during their freak out without noticing. Both of them would agree, that was an experience that neither of them wanted to go through again.

It took a while for them to completely calm down. The most prominent issue for them was their breathing, which during their separation had become increasingly harder for them. They, of course, didn't think that overcoming their situation would be easy, but the amount of backlash the two were experiencing did nothing short of exceed their expectations for how bad it would be.

"That was..."

"...horrible."

Pandora started and Subaru finished, their bodies and breaths still shaky. Their grip on each other's hands was tight and firm, a subconscious and reflexive act from the both of them after the ordeal they'd just gone through.

Neither of them knew what to do now. While they both wanted to keep trying, another part of them didn't. In a way, they felt really motivated yet immensely afraid at the same time. It created a sort of stalemate within themselves that they didn't quite know how to overcome.

"Do you wish to try again?" Pandora somehow found the courage to ask him through unsteady breaths. A mix of a concerned and questioning look found itself within her pretty eyes as she lifted her head, moving it to look at him.

Subaru looked up at her to meet her eyes. Behind the concern he saw a burning fire, one that was fueled by a sense of determination. Subaru thought that if she was so willing and determined to try again, then he should be too. He then found himself fired up, more willing and determined than before, matching the fire she held with his own. He didn't want to disappoint her. Though in reality, Pandora was fired up mainly because *she* actually didn't want to disappoint *him*. In the end, they ended up silently motivating each other through their desire of wanting to make the other happy.

Subaru nodded in reply to her question, finally, even though Pandora was easily able to see his response just through his eyes, just as he was able to do for her. The two

straightened themselves after fully recovering from their previous attempt, taking deep breaths in preparation before separating their hands again.

Thus the process repeated itself over and over and over again. The two of them simply could not find it in themselves to quit, repetitively trying in hopes there would be some kind of improvement. They couldn't tell how much time had passed since starting, nor was it something they wanted to discover. Their focus lay dead centered on achieving their desired outcome and goal. Perhaps they were going about things the wrong way. Maybe they weren't thinking things through clearly enough as they repeated their sufferings over and over again. They hadn't even thought of the possibility that the actions they were currently partaking in could kill them. But, to them, it was the only possible option that had the potential to work, and that was all that mattered.

Shockingly, they were able to notice some subtle change after some time. It wasn't much, but the two of them seemed to somehow stretch their time limit out; this allowed them to have even just a little more time separated from one another. Right after that attempt, having acknowledged the possible development, the two brought themselves as close to the other as possible and sat themselves at the edge of the bed, dangling their legs off of the bedside. Pandora leaned her head onto his shoulder, with Subaru following by lightly resting his head atop hers. They held one another snugly and close, their eyes closed as they focused solely on recovering.

After each attempt, it became harder and harder to calm themselves down. It made sense, and it showed clear signs of danger should they proceed, yet the two of them couldn't bring themselves to stop. Though, having finally realized a potential change in their tolerance made everything feel worth it. After having repeated the process so many times, the two of them were adept at considering how long they could last without contact after fully recovering each time. Having noticed even a mere few seconds increase in tolerance was a big deal to them. Then again, the two held some doubt and considered the fact that they could simply just be imagining things. Subaru and Pandora both supposed that they would have to keep practicing to find out if that was true or not.

As the two tried their best to relax in the other's hold, the door to the room opened with a light creak. Through the crack between the door and the wall, an eyeball peered into the room. Once the eye caught sight of the both of them, the door began to open all the way.

Once the door opened, Subaru cracked his eyes open to look at who was coming in; though, the answer should have been obvious from the start. He saw his contracted spirit walk into the room before shutting the door behind her. When the spirit turned to look at them, she sighed, "Betty will never get used to seeing the two of you like that, I suppose."

Subaru smiled a little at her comment, enjoying the small comment from her whilst ignoring the incoherent and irritated mumbling that followed it. Pandora too opened her eyes, watching as Beatrice closed the distance between them. Subaru's small smile then shifted into a frown, accompanied by a look of concern, "Beako, why are you wearing... that?"

He lifted his free arm up to point at the eyepatch she wore. It was black, matching her outfit, and wrapped around the spirit's left eye. Beatrice physically jumped a little, not having expected Subaru to ask about it so soon. She directed her gaze downward as if she were ashamed, unwilling to meet Subaru's eyes.

Subaru slightly tilted his head to the side, "If you don't want to talk about it, then I understand. Just know that if you ever do want to talk about it, you can. I'll listen to everything you have to say, anytime." His voice was soft and caring, the reassurance not lost in his words. Even though Subaru knew that Beatrice omitted some details from her story, he was also considerate of her reasons for doing so. He thought that, perhaps, she just wasn't ready to share those details, and he would respect that.

Beatrice only nodded in response, showing that she understood. At the same time, she slowly lifted her left hand up to the eyepatch. As if it were a delicate object, she gently placed her middle and index fingers onto it to lightly feel its surface. She put her hand back down a few seconds after, lifting her head back up to look at the pair.

Beatrice's gaze seemed to harden as she narrowed her eye — presumably the other eye too under the eyepatch — at them. It was as if her mind and attitude did a complete turnaround, as she started talking about a completely different topic, "Would you be so kind as to enlighten Betty on why you two are wearing the same outfit, I suppose?"

Subaru could immediately tell, mainly by the look she was giving them, that she wasn't the happiest spirit in the world at the moment. He let out a light chuckle, attempting to alleviate the moderately tense atmosphere, "Well, uh, she didn't have anything else to wear sooo..."

"So you gave her your clothes?" Beatrice raised an eyebrow at him, as if questioning his decision. Subaru only nodded at her, sighing a little at her snarky tone. What was he supposed to do, let her go around in nothing but a towel? She sighed too, as if reluctantly accepting that fact, "Very well, Betty will forgive you due to your lack of options. Be grateful, in fact!" With her declaration, she made sure to point her right index finger at him.

At that, Subaru let himself crack a smile, "Yes, yes. Thank you, Great Beatrice-sama."

"Hmph, good," now she seemed satisfied and smug. She lowered her right arm, only to raise her left and point at Pandora, "But as soon as Betty gets the chance, she is getting you alternative clothing, in fact!"

Pandora blinked at her a few times. She clearly understood why Beatrice was so adamant about the subject, and thus Pandora felt the need to rub it in a little bit. Pandora's mouth developed into a small, satisfied and teasing smile as she leaned into Subaru's shoulder, winking at the Great Spirit. If Beatrice's face could show veins in correspondence to how angry she felt, that moment would have been perfect for it.

Subaru kept his smile, enjoying the moment to its fullest. Moments like these didn't seem to happen as frequently anymore. He audibly let out a laugh, something which caught both girls' attention. Beatrice seemed to relax herself at the sight of Subaru being genuinely happy and enjoying the moment; it made her smile a little too. Pandora's expression failed to falter as she enjoyed the sound of his laugh, comfortably snuggling into her partner a little more.

As Subaru's laugh subsided, he found himself snuggling back into Pandora. As a result, the two ended up in another comfortable cuddling session. That is, until Subaru remembered that Beatrice was in the room too. He looked at her, a smile still resting on his face, "Beako, sorry to make you feel left out." He opened his free arm out wide, as if inviting her to come in, "Come on and join us!"

Beatrice seemed a bit taken back by the sudden offer, clearing her throat with a fist to her mouth, "Ehem, Betty would rather not- WAAAH."

She didn't have time to finish her sentence as Subaru leaned forward, putting his arm around her and pulling her into an embrace. Having pulled her into their little cuddle, Beatrice was reluctantly forced to relax herself and return the embrace. Even though she would rather not have shared this moment with *her*, the spirit did enjoy holding her contractor in an embrace again.

The moment persisted for a long while, before the trio separated. Surprisingly, it was Pandora who pulled away first. Her unexpected movement caused Subaru to break away too, then followed by Beatrice. Subaru gave Pandora a confused look, concerned as to why she broke away so quickly. Once he noticed her expression, his look turned into one of worry.

Beatrice went back to her previous spot, standing in front of the both of them. Pandora's gaze blankly shifted to Beatrice, something that made the spirit slightly uneasy and defensive. "Beatrice," Pandora spoke, the normal tone of her voice altered in a way to convey major seriousness, mixed with many other unreadable emotions; it made the spirit flinch. "May I ask a question?"

The spirit narrowed her eyes, "Yes, you may." She answered simply, her form stiffening with her increase of suspicion.

Pandora's gaze seemed to darken as she gathered her words, something that only made Subaru worry more. When he noticed that her breath was becoming unsteady and shaky, he squeezed her hand. The subtle sign of reassurance and support seemed to help her enough to speak again, "What of the cult during our time away?"

As that question slowly registered itself within Subaru's mind, his expression turned to one of surprise while his eyes began to widen. He turned to face Beatrice, who was still standing defensively with narrowed eye(s) pointed dangerously at the Witch in his arms. She seemed to hesitate in answering, glancing at Subaru in hopes of obtaining some kind of guidance. However, once she saw his expression, she felt inclined to answer, "Their activity has been random. It's as if they run without a single true motive."

"I see..." she glared ahead of her, her expression still dark and serious. "And of the Archbishops?" She asked immediately, once again catching Beatrice off guard.

Beatrice stuttered at first before she was able to formulate a properly conducted answer. Subaru thought that she may have been slightly intimidated as she spoke, "U-Uhm, B-Betty believes that the Archbishops are in a similar state. They run more so in ordinance with their own objectives, contrary to how they operated before, in fact."

"I see..." she stated again, her glare only increasing. "Have any died?"

Beatrice, although confused, started to become even more suspicious of Pandora's intentions. Deciding to see where the Witch will go with this, she chose to answer the question, "As far as Betty is aware, none have."

"Hm," she hummed as if in thought. It didn't take her long to say something again, "We must find them."

Beatrice glared at her immediately, as if her suspicions were confirmed at that moment. "Why would we need to do that?" She questioned seriously, doing her best to intimidate the Witch in front of her through her look and posture. "For all Betty knows, this could be a trick, a ruse for you to run back to your cult, taking Betty's Subaru with you so that he can be used as a tool for you, in fact."

Her accusation was like a match; a match that lit a huge fire within Pandora to make her react in a way Subaru hadn't expected. His partner stood up immediately, her glare challenging Beatrice's own. As the distance between the two became less and less, Subaru quickly stood up and put himself between them. Beatrice's face possessed hostility of the highest margin, all whilst Pandora held an uncharacteristically dark and hateful glare. Both of their looks cut like daggers into the target, neither of them seemingly willing to let it falter. Beatrice began to raise her hand, as if in preparation to cast an offensive spell, while Pandora's grip on Subaru's hand tightened. She squeezed to such an extent that the sheer rage she conveyed through the intense pressure was impossible to ignore.

Subaru made it a point to squeeze Pandora's hand back, hoping that the action would help calm her down. Similarly, he put a hand on Beatrice's head in hopes he could distract her from the situation. When those actions did little to nothing for him, he spoke, "Woah, woah, both of you please calm down."

That too didn't seem to work, as both girls ignored him entirely and continued to glare daggers at one another. Inwardly Subaru began to panic, having no idea as to what to do. He looked down to Beatrice, thinking of the next best thing.

He took a deep breath before he began, "Listen, Beako." He saw her gaze shift to look at him for a split second. That was good, it showed she was listening to him. "I know you don't trust her, and I can understand why. I really can."

He moved his head over to look at his partner, the expression on her face remaining unchanged nor did her glare redirect itself. As an act of reassurance to her, he started to caress his thumb along the back of her hand. He hoped it would at least comfort or ease her, even just by a small margin.

He looked back to Beatrice, his gaze meeting her eyes even though hers failed to meet him back. "But, I know you trust me. And trust me when I say she isn't like that anymore. She's come a long way, and we've both changed," at those words, he felt a change of pressure on his hand. Her grip lightened and her thumb slightly moved itself along the back of his hand in appreciation. "Beako, look into my eyes. Look into my eyes and tell me that you don't trust what I say."

At his comment Beatrice finally moved her gaze to him. She did as he instructed, looking deeply into his eyes for any reason to distrust his words: a sign of being forced to say those words, mind control, anything. However, the only thing she found in those eyes was genuine sincerity. They were the same nasty looking eyes that belonged to the very same person she trusted to take her hand all that time ago. After a few moments, her glare softened as she let out a deep breath. She spoke in a heavy tone, "Fine, Betty does not doubt you, in fact. But Betty wants a full explanation from her!"

Her glare somewhat came back as she demanded an explanation. Subaru sighed in relief, thankful that a potential crisis was averted. He looked over to Pandora, only to quickly grow worried again when he noticed that her expression hadn't changed much, if at all.

Before Subaru had time to say anything, she voiced, "You will get your explanation." Her tone was serious, borderline threatening. Pandora leant down, making sure to get close to Beatrice's face so the spirit could clearly see her entire expression. Her eyes gave an impression of craziness, stuck in a sort of wide-eyed glare, accompanied by a blank and almost murderous expression on her face. Pandora spoke again, "Do not doubt my love for Subaru ever again."

Subaru was shocked, to say the least, as he became locked in place. He now understood why she had gotten so triggered. Pandora had been offended by Beatrice's accusation, but it wasn't about her. It was about him. When Beatrice accused Pandora of wanting to use him as a tool, she snapped.

The platinum haired girl backed herself up, lightly dragging Subaru's arm with her, as she sat herself back down on the bed. He was still frozen in place, his gaze being the only thing that completely followed her. He still didn't quite know how to process her outburst. He understood her anger; if someone had insulted his love for her, he would be angry too. However, the tone she spoke in, the face she made and the aura she expelled was terrifying.

He mentally slapped himself, snapping out of his thoughts. Once he did so, he noticed Pandora's condition: she was having a breakdown. He felt his insides start to churn, his concern for her kicking in at that moment as he quickly sat down next to her and attempted to do his best to calm her down. He put his free hand behind her head, gently bringing it closer as he pressed his against hers. She was lightly starting to cry, for reasons he didn't even know why or understand; he'd never seen her act this way before. Even after she embraced him tightly, starting to calm down in his arms, he felt useless. He wanted to do more for her, but he couldn't.

As her crying began to subside, her hold on him loosening, he moved his head back to look at her. His hand found itself on her cheek as he carefully asked, "Dora, are you feeling any better?"

It took a moment, but she nodded. When she picked her head up to look at him, he could visibly see the sadness laced within. Not only that, but he saw fear too. Pandora

was afraid of something, and he didn't even know how to help.

"I... I am okay, Baru," she gave him a forceful smile, something that pained Subaru to see. He wouldn't push the issue, though. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable, nor did he want to impose and make things worse. He firmly believed that she would talk to him when she was ready. Pandora took a deep breath, readying herself to speak again, "I do believe I owe you both an explanation, then?"

Neither Subaru or Beatrice responded, instead opting to remain silent. Beatrice, who had been silently watching the entire time, didn't know what to think. In her mind, as Subaru sometimes used to say, she had just been on a wildly terrifying roller coaster. Pandora was currently like an enigma to her, and it was best not to potentially provoke something she didn't fully understand.

Pandora, noticing their silence, proceeded with her speech, "I propose that we hunt down and eliminate the remnants of the cult."

Subaru and Beatrice could not hide their surprise. Though, they still stayed silent as Pandora stared aimlessly at the floor. Her free hand played with the sleeve of her tracksuit, as if she were nervous. Subaru kept rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand, hoping to soothe her nerves.

Beatrice was the first one to speak, "What brought this on, I wonder?" Despite the fact that she only asked one question, it was clear that she harbored more.

"I..." she tried to speak, but couldn't find the will to do so. Her toes curled into the floor and her hands began clenching as her nerves only increased.

"Dora." The call of her nickname was unexpected to her. She mentally jumped, turning her head so she could look at Subaru. When she did so, his grip on her hand momentarily tightened into hers. The emotion displayed in his eyes could only be described as loving and caring. His mouth began to open, and she waited in anticipation for his next words, "Don't force yourself. Take as much time as you need." His eyes softened, a small and sincere smile developing on his face, "It doesn't matter how long it takes. I'll be here for you, always."

She stared at him for a few seconds, before she gave him a small, genuine smile of her own. It was almost contagious; the way he smiled, made her relax and calm down. She was truly lucky to have him... too lucky.

She took a deep breath, her gaze shifting back to the floor as she prepared herself to speak; Subaru and Beatrice silently and patiently waiting for her. She didn't have a planned speech for this, but she knew what she had to say, "I... I know that it is not enough to make up for my past actions." She glanced at Subaru for a second, then moved her eyes to Beatrice. "But... I owe it to you, to everyone, to remedy at least one of the mistakes that I have made in my lifetime."

The two listeners were silent to her words at first, taking time to process her confession. This time, it was Subaru who spoke up first, "So you want to take out the cult because you regret your involvement with them? Did I understand that right?"

Pandora turned to him, giving him a slight nod, "That is part of it, yes."

Subaru tilted his head a little, "What other reason is there, then?"

At that, she smiled, "The past is not something we can change or recover, but we can work on achieving the best future possible. That is my goal. I wish to face the mistakes of my past. I wish to make the future something I can feel satisfied with."

Subaru looked at her with a neutral expression for a moment, but before long he smiled back at her. He couldn't help but think that she used him as inspiration for that mindset. In response, he returned, "If you're going through hell, keep going, amiright?"

She lightly hit his arm with her free hand in retaliation for that comment, both of them laughing with one another. Her words had touched Subaru. Of course, he'd told her about his time in the Sanctuary when they were trapped in the seal together. He'd told her about how he'd found closure with his parents there, how he'd faced his past and looked into the future. Seeing that same resolve in her made him happy, proud even.

As they softly laughed together, the sound of someone clearing their throat made itself prominently known. "I hope you didn't forget about Betty, I suppose!" Their laughter started to die down as the spirit crossed her arms, closing her eye(s) in thought. "If you're going after the cult, Betty will surely assist, in fact."

Subaru looked at his contracted spirit with an appreciative smile on his face. Even after all of the things she's been through, all the pain she was experiencing, she was still willing to help them. "Thanks Beako, you're the best."

"Hmph!" She proudly puffed out her chest, a smirk on her face as her palms pressed themselves against her waist. "Betty is indeed the best!"

Subaru chuckled at Beatrice's behavior. He was glad that the mood had lightened up; it felt so much livelier than it once did. He turned to Pandora, his smile now dominantly possessing a feeling of uncertainty as he spoke, "I don't know how much help I'll be, though. I'm not really a fighter and I'm not really strong enough to be one. The best I can do is whip them from a distance, probably."

As Subaru nervously chuckled at his own joke, Pandora looked at him, "Actually, Baru, you have the potential to possess more than enough combat power."

Following her comment, he became confused. However, before he could question it, Beatrice spoke up, "You're talking about his latent Authorities, I wonder?"

Pandora looked at Beatrice and nodded in confirmation. Subaru was still confused, though, and decided to question their statements, "What're you two talking about? The Authorities I have basically give me little to no power. Hell, most of the time I get hurt trying to use them! "

Pandora turned to him, shaking her head in denial, "That is not true, Baru. You, unlike the Archbishops you took them from, are compatible with them. You just require training and practice, something that I- we... can help you with."

"Wait, wait, so hold on," Subaru interjected, moving his free hand wildly in a stopping motion. "So, you're telling me that this whole time I could have just trained myself to use them better?! That would have solved all of my issues?!"

She nodded, lightly giggling at his exaggerated antics, "Yes, that is correct. As an example, let us use your Authority of Sloth. You say it hurts to use, yes? I believe that is because you have not purified, or properly bonded with, the Authority yet."

Subaru wanted to facepalm, to hit his head against the wall a few times. Why hadn't he thought of this? He couldn't believe himself for not considering this. He could have at least tried! He turned to Beatrice, an expression that feigned frustration plastered on his face, "And why didn't you say anything?"

The Great Spirit shrugged, "Betty wasn't aware of this either, I suppose. As much as Betty hates to admit it, this is out of Betty's area of expertise."

Subaru sighed; of course she wasn't aware. Pandora giggled again, drawing his attention to her, "Do not worry, Baru. I shall do my best to teach you!"

Man her smile was intoxicating. Even though it basically shone as bright as the sun and practically blinded his eyes, he couldn't help but look mesmerizingly into it. Suddenly, after looking at her smile, he found himself highly motivated; he stood up, right hand and index finger pointed up at the ceiling, "Well, let's get started! No time to lose!"

"No!" Beatrice screamed, immediately making him jump back. "You buffon, idiot, moron! It's already late, you need to sleep, in fact!"

"...Huh?" Subaru uttered, confused as to what the spirit was talking about. Pandora was also confused, tilting her head cutely to the side as she looked at Beatrice curiously. In response, Beatrice only walked to the nearest window and quickly pulled the curtain aside.

"Oh."

"Oh."

Both Pandora and Subaru mumbled, now having a great view of the pitch black darkness outside. Beatrice closed the curtains, walking back over to them. "Yeah, 'oh'," she mocked. "Whatever you two did together took all day, in fact. Now get to bed!"

With that, the trio properly climbed into the bed. Despite the fact that Pandora and Subaru were wearing their tracksuits, it was actually quite easy for them to get comfortable. They faced one another in the bed, pulling each other in as much as possible to the point that their heads touched. That was how they cuddled; arms wrapped around the other's form while legs were tangled together. Somehow, they were comfortable. Beatrice wrapped herself around Subaru's back, with both her arms firmly around his backside. That was how they fell asleep.

"Hnng..." Beatrice mumbled, stirring a little bit as she slept. She felt a light tap on her cheek, making her regain some of her sense of mind. She didn't want to wake up, not when she felt so comfortable. Maybe if she just ignored the feeling, it would just go away eventually.

When she felt the tap again, she finally felt annoyed enough to fully open her eyes. She quickly sat up, clear frustration on her face. Just as she was about to loudly complain about the annoyance, a hand covered her mouth. It scared Beatrice enough to make her jump, prompting her to frantically look for the source.

Through the darkness she saw a long set of 'shiny' hair, platinum in color, attached to a face that was looking directly at her. It was hard to see it, but the face held a fairly serious expression presented on it. "Shhh," the figure quietly shushed her, gesturing their head to the side toward another figure. This one was sleeping, however, and it was clear that the first figure didn't want to wake the second.

When Beatrice regained her composure, having started to fully wake up, she realized that her assailant was actually the 'former' Witch Pandora. Beatrice gave her a frustrated glare before nodding. Pandora released her hand from Beatrice's mouth, something in which the spirit was thankful for. Though, she felt the need to wash her mouth now.

In a whisper, Beatrice inquired, "What do you want, I wonder?" She didn't respond right away. Beatrice wasn't too particularly patient at the moment, especially since she'd just woken up, so when Pandora failed to respond within the next few seconds, she was tempted to irritatingly repeat herself. "What is it, Witch? "Betty would like to get back to sleep, in fact."

Pandora let out a low and light sigh, her eyes closing for a moment as she thought. Soon enough, they opened again as the girl prepared herself to speak in a similar whisper, "I need your assistance."

Beatrice rolled her eyes, "Surely this can wait until morning. Betty is going to-

As Beatrice moved to lay back down, a hand grabbed her arm. It was quite the firm hold, one that made her anxious and uncomfortable. Beatrice looked back to Pandora, who's expression hadn't changed, "It cannot."

Beatrice blankly looked at her for a few moments, contemplating the implications of those words. Eventually, she sighed and sat back up, looking at Pandora with an unreadable expression, "Betty guesses that you don't want to involve her Subaru in this matter, I suppose."

Pandora stared at her for a second before nodding, "Yes, that is correct."

Beatrice sighed again. She was confused, perhaps even a bit distrustful, but she was willing to give her a chance. Though, that didn't mean she would be nice, "Then speak, quickly."

Pandora went silent again, perhaps thinking to herself. Another sigh soon followed, "I would like to request a favor from you, if you are willing to look into it."

"It would depend on what you want, I suppose," Beatrice responded matter-of-factly.

Silence once again. It was starting to bother Beatrice, just a little bit. "Is there... any possible way you could lock or seal away my Authority?"

Beatrice did a double take at the question, almost physically recoiling due to her surprise. "Where did such a request come from, I wonder? Do you think that your abilities won't be useful in the coming conflicts? Why so suddenly ask this, what is your goal..."

As Beatrice trailed off, her words lined with suspicion, Pandora averted her gaze, "I do not trust myself."

At that, the Great Spirit looked at her as if she'd grown another head. It was clear that the answer she received wasn't the one she would have expected. Beatrice ended up softening her gaze, continuing to prod into the situation, "Does this have anything to do with your mental breakdown, I wonder?"

Pandora gave her a few small little nods in reply, "Partially. I am having trouble understanding myself, at the moment."

"In what way do you mean?" Beatrice questioned, unsure as to what Pandora fully meant.

The former Witch looked at the spirit, unsure as to whether she could freely talk about her issues. Beatrice hardly trusted her, and often grew suspicious of anything she said or did. What would make Beatrice believe her now? And even so, she hadn't even talked to Subaru about it yet. Telling Beatrice before Subaru was a big deal for her. However, she only didn't want to inform Subaru because of him potentially fearing her, or making him worry too much for her. She was more concerned about the latter, though.

In the end, after considering all of her options and feelings on the matter at hand, she took a deep breath and spoke, "I'm not how I once was. I think differently, I feel different, and I want different things."

Pandora looked at her hand, clenching and unclenching it a few times. Memories of her past invaded her mind. Despite how much she wanted to forget them, she knew she couldn't entirely do that. For the most part, they would be stuck with her indefinitely. The best thing she could do would be to move on and start something new, which was something she was trying to do.

"I will be truthful with you," Pandora started bluntly, raising her head to look at Beatrice once more. "My care for you is only as an extension of Subaru's. As long as Subaru cares for you, I do as well. I will be kind to you as long as you continue to be dear to him. I do not doubt that you feel a similar way in relation to me. However, despite our feelings about one another, I believe we can work together for his well-being."

She said nothing but the truth to the spirit. In a way, it was hard for Pandora to do so. In actuality, as an individual herself, she couldn't care less about Beatrice. As she said, the only reason she cared for her was because of Subaru. As long as he, the only person she held dear, cared about her, then she did her best to be accommodating for him.

Truthfully, when she first started to change, Subaru had helped her more than she'd ever expected. He helped her forget about her past, helped her try to move on, and focus on how she could be in the future. Even though they were trapped in a box, stranded in an empty void where time was irrelevant, the aspect of change and the future felt impactful to her. Subaru made her open her eyes, to see things she'd never thought to have seen before. The joy in life, in love, and in so many other things. She remembered every conversation they had and held them close to her heart. That was why Subaru was and would continue to be the only person she'd ever truly love and care for.

"Since I've been released, I have felt myself exist as the halves of two people," she continued, Beatrice still listening intently. "I prefer to distinguish these people as separate entities. There is the version of me that you are currently speaking with; I like to refer to myself as just Pandora, or Dora. Then, there is the version of me from the past, the one in which I consider the Witch of Vainglory."

Beatrice was slightly surprised by the prospect, but seemed to understand the basics of what Pandora was saying. "So, what you're saying is that you have split personalities?"

Pandora slouched a bit, "Something similar to that, I believe. I cannot be certain, though. But... earlier, when you accused me of using Subaru, I felt a small part of my past self returning in that moment. It felt as if I were a completely different person."

She let out a long huff after she finished speaking. Saying that was difficult for her, and trusting someone she didn't necessarily care for with such sensitive information didn't make her feel comfortable either. She'd never felt so vulnerable before.

Though, everything she said was the truth. She didn't understand it herself, in all honesty, and that scared her. Whether there were two people, two personalities, inhabiting the same body; or, whether it was her behaving in a similar way to her past self as a response to certain situations... it didn't matter. What truly mattered to her was the potential consequences of it. She thought that, just maybe, sealing her Authority away would help her retain herself. It was a stretch, but she was desperate; she couldn't take the risk of something happening if she left things alone.

"That is why I would like your help," she prompted, looking at Beatrice with a slight bit of hope. "I do not want to do something I will end up regretting. I... I do not want to hurt him," her gaze shifted to Subaru's sleeping form. Her eyes softened as her free hand lovingly laid itself on his arm. "I have confidence that you can find some way to seal or block my Authority from being used, even just partially."

Beatrice stayed silent, as if absorbing all of the information Pandora had just dumped on her. "Hm," she hummed, putting a hand to her chin in thought. Subaru trusted her, and Beatrice trusted Subaru, so she was willing to try and be receptive to things. She could understand what Pandora was saying, but one thing didn't make sense to her, "Betty must ask: why didn't you talk to Betty's Subaru about this first, I wonder?"

Pandora never moved her eyes away from him, moving her hand to his cheek. She smiled sweetly, adoring his peaceful state of slumber. "I do not want to hurt him, to make him worry. He has helped me so much already... he deserves a break."

At that, Beatrice too moved her eyes to look at her sleeping contractor. She moved a hand to his hair and gently pulled a strand of it away from his eyes. Beatrice let herself smile too, "Betty's Subaru is amazing. He is always trying to help people, even though sometimes he's a complete moron about it, in fact." Memories of Subaru sealing himself away began to resurface, but before she could become distracted by them she spoke again, "Betty's Subaru has a self-sacrificing habit that he really needs to get rid

of." She paused in her words, turning to look at Pandora again, "Betty can agree with you. Subaru needs a break; time in which he does not have to suffer for others."

It was at that moment Pandora knew that Beatrice had no idea. She had no idea of how much he had already suffered, how much pain he'd gone through, just for the sake of his friends and the people he loved. She remembered when he first told her about his curse: Return by Death. She remembered when he told her about his first deaths, his first loops and experiences in this world. She remembered how emotional he had gotten, especially during certain parts of his story. She wanted to let him rest, just this once.

"Will you lend me your aid, then?" Pandora asked the spirit, her eyes finally shifting from Subaru to Beatrice, containing a sense of hope.

Beatrice stared at her for a few seconds, as if she were thinking, before responding to the question, "Betty will help you, I suppose. Betty will do some research through the coming days and will inform you on any progress or updates."

Pandora nodded, a genuinely grateful smile on her face, "Thank you."

Beatrice seemed stunned at such a genuine sounding form of gratitude from her, but accepted it nonetheless, only nodding in acknowledgment. From there, the two had nothing else to say to one another. It was then that the two of them decided to try and sleep once more, doing their best to become comfortable once again.

A sudden jolt shook the bed before the two had a chance to fall asleep again. At first, they were confused, unsure as to whether it was just their imagination or if it was something else. Their first choice was to ignore it, opting to try and fall asleep again. However, once two more jolts happened, both occurring in rapid succession of one another, the two decided to sit up.

They looked around the room and at the bed, even at each other, both unsure of what was causing the issue. Though, when they felt another jolt and saw Subaru's leg rapidly move, they understood. Quickly they grew worried and concerned, both girls trying to check on him as he slept. Pandora rolled him off of his side, making him lay flat on his back, as Beatrice examined his condition further.

Along with seemingly random jolts in his sleep, he was sweating a lot. And as the seconds passed, his grip on Pandora's hand began to tighten as he started to shift his head from side to side, making light grunting noises, almost as if he were in pain or feeling something unpleasant. Pandora got above him to get a clear view of his face, putting her hand on his cheek, "Baru! Baru, please, wake up!"

Subaru couldn't hear her calls. Instead, he found himself floating in pure darkness. Everything around him, no matter where he looked, was dark. He was lost in a void, and, in a way, it was kind of nostalgic to him.

"Liar..."

A loud female voice boomed, echoing around him in the abyss he floated in. It made him gasp as he jolted back, feeling a sense of fear suddenly as he began looking in desperation around himself for the voice's source. He found nothing but the void, though.

Suddenly, a bright light shone from above him. It was blinding, but he could only look up at it. It seemed to be coming closer, and before he knew it the darkness was replaced by the light. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the brightness, and when he reopened them he found himself floating in a desert.

When he turned around, he found himself facing the familiar sight of the Pleiades Watchtower. He took deep breaths, eyes shifting at everything in sight out of confusion and desperation. That was when dark shadows began to rapidly emerge from inside

the tower, swallowing the entirety of it in its dark grasp. The shadows wasted no time, rapidly and very quickly expanding outward into the massive desert, consuming everything in its path.

"You shared our secret..."

The female voice boomed again, echoing around him. He could tell that she was upset... no, not only upset, she was livid too. He felt himself panicking on the inside, unsure as to what he could even possibly do. He didn't even know what was happening.

"You told... her...!"

The voice boomed and echoed once more. It filled his anxiety, made him nervous. When he closed his eyes, attempting to try and escape this warped reality, the sound of many different whispers suddenly invaded his ears. When he tried to open his eyes, he couldn't; it was as if they had become glued shut. The whispers were overwhelming enough to make him cover his ears, but that didn't stop them from coming. He couldn't understand any of them, but he knew that they were afraid. Scared, sad, angry... dying.

After the onslaught of voices, he finally found himself able to open his eyes. He was staring at the ceiling inside of a dark room. When he sat up, he found himself alone in his bedroom. He looked at his hand, lost and confused, feeling like he was missing something. He started to move to the edge of the bed, dangling his legs off of the side. He looked around the room; nothing seemed to have physically changed.

"You must leave, my beloved!" A voice boomed and echoed again, this time with a different tone. This one was softer, almost kind. However, when they tried to continue, it was as if something was interfering, *"I...much...don't...time...strong...!"*

After those words, Subaru found himself suddenly drawn to look at the desk in the room. On it lay a book, one of the books Beatrice had brought back from the dungeon. It was closed, too far for Subaru to read the title. Though he got up, beginning to make his way toward it.

The book opened on its own, momentarily startling him. He kept his advance, however, as the book flipped through itself until it landed on a specific page. Some of the words started to glow, highlighting themselves on the page like someone was reading them out.

He was suddenly taken back by the sudden appearance of something he couldn't explain. Above the book appeared a mesh of colors, existing in shapes that appeared to him as a sea of constantly shifting prisms. The sight was mesmerizing, but confusing to him. What did it mean?

He kept inching closer, trying his best to peer into the book in hopes of attaining answers. Before he could, the book suddenly began to shake, its color draining and being stained in nothing but black, making it unreadable. Suddenly, Subaru was violently pulled backward until he hit the wall. He tried to move, to struggle, to escape, but to no avail. He was stuck against the wall, pinned by an invisible force as dark shadows began to seep into the room from every corner and crevice possible. They began consuming everything in the room, leaving nothing behind until it was only him left.

When the shadows finally engulfed him, he found himself back in the void he started. His anxiety rose as an eerie silence overwhelmed him. Then, the feeling of something creeping next to his left ear gave him chills. He couldn't see it, but he felt a presence. It was then he felt a tickle of breath hit his ear, as a voice whispered:

"I love you."

Subaru sprang up in the bed, gasping for air. When he frantically looked around, he saw the concerned looks of both Pandora and Beatrice. Both of them hugged him, bombarding him with worried questions and statements. He hardly had time to answer one question before they started to ask him another.

It took him some time to calm down and reassure them that he was okay, insisting that it was only a nightmare. He was sure that they didn't believe him, but that was fine. They didn't pressure him about it, even though he could tell that they wanted to. Though, even if he wanted to, he couldn't bring himself to talk about what he'd just experienced. Whether it was out of fear or something else, he wasn't sure, but he had a strong feeling that he shouldn't even attempt to do so, or else he may end up regretting it.

Subaru apologized for disturbing and worrying them — even though they blatantly denied that it was an issue — and, in the end, the trio agreed to surrender themselves to sleep once again. Subaru found it a bit troubling to fall asleep again, his mind plagued by his previous nightmare and afraid he'd go through it all again. He ended up holding onto Pandora a little tighter than he meant to, but it was something she gladly reciprocated.

When morning came Subaru felt a lot better, which was something that surprised him at first. After some thought, he decided to simply live in the moment for now. He chose to focus on their current goal instead of worrying about something else, especially when it could've just been a nightmare. It was wishful thinking, and perhaps even foolish, but currently the most important thing to him was Pandora's happiness. He wanted to help her, so that's what he planned to do.

The same routine as the previous day played out. The trio awoke at around the same time, then proceeded to the dining room. Beatrice served them some of her special remedy once more, something they all shared the pleasure in drinking, before the spirit disappeared. Once again, Subaru and Pandora were left alone before they could even finish their drinks.

When Subaru looked at her, he saw a light smile on her face. She was happy, and that made him happy too. He cracked a similar smile, as if hers was contagious. Together they silently enjoyed the rest of their drink, which apparently satiated their hunger along with their thirst and a few other bodily needs. Who knew, right?

Once they were finished, the two decided to head back to their room. Later they would begin Subaru's training with Beatrice, so there was currently nothing to completely occupy themselves with. Just as they were approaching the door, Pandora seemed to halt in her place. Subaru stopped too, looking at her with a slightly concerned look.

Though, she kept her smile, "Say, Subaru." Her voice was sweet and angelic, almost even excited. It made Subaru ease himself, developing a smile of his own as he recited their usual way interacting.

"Yes, Dora?"

She moved her eyes slightly upward to look toward the ceiling, as if in deep thought, "Do you remember all we talked about yesterday? Of the future?"

Subaru nodded, "I do."

She looked at him, her expression never changing, "It made me remember when we were together, in the seal. We used to converse about the future a lot. We mused about possibilities if we ever got released; always talking about what we would do afterward. Do you remember that?"

He closed his eyes, recalling the fond memories of the conversations he had with her, "Of course I do."

"I have been thinking, Baru," she said, suddenly a little more cheerful. Subaru could feel her eagerness as she grabbed his other hand, intertwining it with hers as she looked up into his eyes. "If you are willing, I would like to start that future with you."

"Dora..." he uttered, trailing off as he looked back into her eyes. Even though he had a horrible experience during the night, the girl in front of him made him forget it all at that moment. It was as if all of his problems faded away as he solely focused on her. He spoke to her from the heart, "I'd love to."

She beamed at him. It was mesmerizing; Subaru felt like he could die from the overwhelming exposure to such a bright smile. She squeezed his hands a little tighter, her face mixing into a slightly different expression suddenly, as if she were nervous, "Baru..." she trailed off, her eyes glancing slightly to the side as she seemed embarrassed to say her next sentence. Subaru gave her hands a light squeeze to comfort and reassure her, something that must've helped her regain enough courage to continue with her question, "Just to make sure that your thoughts on the subject have not changed... how do you feel about... having children?"

He could only bring himself to blink at her for a few moments. Subaru was truly baffled on what he could say in response, slightly embarrassed by the question as she was.

His stunned expression and lack of reply seemed to make Pandora reconsider her decision in asking, "Sorry, Baru. I should not have asked." She shook her head, her expression turning into one that better resembled guilt.

Subaru, seeing her change in mood, quickly interjected, "No, Dora, that's not it. I was just surprised by the question, that's all." She looked back up at him again. He could see the remnants of hope in her eyes as he brought himself to continue, "But, yes, my thoughts haven't changed."

He smiled kindly at her as her expression started to beam again, a light blush appearing on her cheeks. He loved seeing her happy, it always brightened his mood. Well, they always copied the other's mood. If one was happy, the other was too. If one was sad, then the other would be sad too. It was how they were, and Subaru wouldn't dare change that.

"Baru, shall we get started now?"

Subaru froze, his cheeks heating up at the sudden and very eager proclamation. She let go of one of his hands, quickly starting to move forward again and subsequently dragging him along with her. He wasn't mentally prepared for this.

As she made it to the bedroom door, beginning to open it, he did his best to plead, "Hey- Hey, Dora. Dora... Dora, wait. Wait. Waaaaait!"

His cries fell on deaf ears as he got dragged into the room, the door closing behind them.

Just wanted to start off by saying that whatever questions you may have, or anything like that, will probably be answered in the next chapter.

Even though some of the reasoning for Subaru basically ignoring that 'nightmare' was explained here, it will also be explored more in the next chapter.

Should I put "Vainglory IF" into the description? I feel like it's valid, but what do you all think?

Your feedback has been received. I'm going to be doing a special chapter after this one, which will feature explicit content (if you couldn't tell by the ending of this one). It will be entirely optional to read, in case it's not something you're interested in.

That's all! Hope this was adequate enough. If you have any other questions, feel free to ask. See you next time!

***Chapter 7*: Love and Authority**

Man, this should not have taken this long. I had a lot of trouble with this one, constantly second guessing my logic and making sure it made sense. Rewriting after rewriting, proofread after proofread. It's been a pain. In the end, I think I nailed down the main aspects of what I wanted this chapter to be. But, still, this chapter isn't exactly my proudest. Maybe I just need a break...

That being said, this is the longest chapter I've written for this story so far (that being around 21k words). It'll likely stay that way, too. Hell, there was more I wanted to put in, but this is already super late and I felt pretty satisfied with what I've included already. It's a pretty dialogue heavy chapter, too.

If you're reading this and need a break, I don't blame you. The sections in this, explicitly separated with scene dividers, are pretty clearly defined, so feel free to jump out of the story for a while as a break in between some sections if you need to. That way it doesn't feel like you're hopping out in the middle of something.

I'll also take more questions if any of you have any after this chapter.

Also, to answer a very, very common question that I always receive: I'm very sure that you all will like the next chapter. Ha!

If you're wondering about what happened to the old interlude chapter, the one that features smut, I decided to move it into its own story for undisclosed reasons. You can find it on my profile, if you're interested. It's canon, but not required to read. I might add more at some point when it feels appropriate; not sure yet, though.

Other notes/fixes:

-Chapter 1 has received slight revisions for Pandora's speech to better match her current form of talking.

-Chapter 3 has been edited to include more details about their overall condition in Beatrice's opening explanation.

-Chapter 4 has received a change in the name of one of the books to be more specific.

-Chapter 6 has received a retcon, in which Pandora now explains Subaru's authorities a bit differently.

Let me know what you think of this chapter, I'd love some feedback on what you thought of it and predictions and all that stuff. Happy reading! I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 7: Love and Authority

Footsteps echoed through the halls of the mansion, as an inseparable pair wandered through the mansion halls. Their hands were together again, intertwined comfortably at their sides, while their free hands fiddled with certain parts of their clothing.

The two were anything but organized and, if anything, it was incredibly obvious to see. Both of them had messy hair, which suited well with their flustered faces, with haphazardly worn clothes, having been put on in a rush. To top it all off, there were marks on both of their necks; marks that were carelessly left alone, allowing them to be unintentionally obvious and presentable to anyone looking. If one knew of what the marks signified, their act of misconduct would easily be given away.

One would likely question the reason for their careless haste. To put it simply, they were running late. They were supposed to have met Beatrice a while ago, as part of

their scheduled plan, in order for them to start helping Subaru develop his Authorities.

Unfortunately, they'd been too caught up in cuddling with each other, which allowed time to slip right under their noses. Subaru had been the first to notice that something was amiss. Knowing full well how Beatrice can get when she's angry, he began to panic. Then, since he started rushing to get ready, Pandora did as well. In the end, it caused them to hurriedly recompose themselves to convene with the Great Spirit. That was why they seemed so chaotic.

As they fiddled with their tracksuits more, they turned a corner and began to head-

"*Ahem.*"

The two stopped in their tracks. Slowly they both turned around, allowing themselves to face the one who gathered their attention. Subaru, for one, let himself comically sweatdrop as he came face-to-face with his annoyed — and quite frankly angry — contracted spirit.

"Where were you two, I wonder?" She questioned in a voice that was less than pleased. Her arms crossed to visually convey her annoyance even more, as if her expression wasn't enough.

Subaru and Pandora merely shared a glance. Their faces were tinted red, their breaths caught in their throats due to the sheer embarrassment the two shared. It was a bit worse for Subaru, though.

"Well, since you won't answer Betty then- wait, I suppose. What are those marks on your necks?" she narrowed her eyes, fixing them on the abnormal additions to their bodies. The two shuffled together nervously, immediately slapping their hands to their necks to cover the spots from her gaze.

It hardly bothered Beatrice. If anything, their actions only proved her suspicions. She trailed her eyes along each of them, noting each abnormality she saw. She was easily able to conclude that this was, in fact, not how she'd left them after breakfast. Using common sense, she'd determined that they'd been up to some sort of nefarious business while she wasn't around. It was the only sensible answer, really.

Eventually, she moved her eyes back to their faces, looking at them pointedly. Then, she just stared. Silently, almost unnervingly, staring at them with that unchangingly pointed look. Subaru somehow gathered the will to speak, clearing his throat and stammering, "S-So, uh... B-Beako-

"You're both disgusting, in fact."

Her words made him shut up, becoming more embarrassed by each passing second. He glanced over to Pandora, who now only kept her eyes locked onto Beatrice. Strangely enough, he couldn't tell exactly what she was thinking. But her eyes and her expression seemed... blank. It was too blank, too empty, for his liking. It worried him, so he gave her hand a light squeeze in hopes of garnering her attention. It seemed to have worked; he watched her as she finally blinked a few times, in rapid succession, focusing her gaze onto him.

He looked at her with a sense of relief. He didn't necessarily want to say it aloud but, ever since her outburst the previous day, he had grown increasingly concerned. The face she made then — and subsequently the face she made now — ended up scaring him. He didn't quite understand what was wrong, and he knew that she was hiding something from him, but he didn't want to pressure her. Subaru trusted her; he knew that she would talk to him about her issues when she felt ready.

"I take it that you don't see this as a problem, seeing as that you're both *ignoring* Betty, I suppose," she glared at them intensely, her only visible eyebrow slightly twitching as her cold voice cut through them like butter.

Subaru and Pandora both turned their heads to face her. Subaru developed a guilty expression, raising his free hand up to his face in a form of apology. He did his best to force a smile onto his guilty face, appealing to her with a shaky voice, "B-Beako, we're really sorry... we didn't mean to be late, we just lost track of time, honest."

Beatrice studied him for a few moments. It wasn't hard to see his honesty, as well as his actual guilt. He really, genuinely didn't intend on making her wait. However, when she looked over to Pandora, Beatrice could easily tell that she wasn't guilty at all. In fact, it was quite the contrary. Compared to how blank her face was just moments ago, she now seemed quite happy and giddy. Beatrice also swore that she noticed a hint of pride in Pandora's attitude, but chose to ignore it.

Beatrice only sighed, bringing a hand up to her nose to pinch it. Perhaps it was best to just drop it and move on. Though, there was still one thing she had to ask, "Please tell Betty that you didn't do it on *the bed we sleep on*. Tell Betty that you picked a guest room."

When Subaru froze, she wanted to scream. She was both incredibly angry and disgusted. Why did her contractor have to be this way? Now she was going to have to do the laundry. Perhaps she'd clean the sheets for more than a few hours just to make herself feel more comfortable.

She took deep breaths to calm herself down, her eyes gazing upon them with a tired look. "Just... Just go prepare yourselves outside. Betty will meet you in a few moments, I suppose."

With that, the Great Spirit reluctantly started trekking her way through the mansion and to their shared room. The duo silently watched her leave, which Beatrice honestly preferred. When she got to that room, she was going to replace every piece of fabric that was in there... just in case she forgot later.

Some time passed before all three of them met outdoors. Subaru and Pandora both, surprisingly, looked better than they did before. Their hair seemed a bit neater and their clothes were more straightened and organized. Luckily, their tracksuit jackets had a forgiving collar that allowed them to hide the marks on their necks, as well.

"Why are we outside, again?" Subaru asked, feeling the light breeze hit his skin with a chill. "I feel like we could've just done this in the mansion."

Pandora looked at him, the cold of the outside seeming to not bother her at all, "We are far enough away from anything too important. It allows us more leeway to test certain things, all without *a certain someone* getting upset."

They all stood in the middle of a patch of grass, far enough away from any prominent structures. So, theoretically, it should be safe to practice using Authorities. The only downside was the very chilling breeze, which Subaru swore he was the only one even noticing.

Beatrice glared at Pandora after hearing her comment, "While your statement is true, I find the comment unnecessary, in fact."

Pandora shifted her gaze to the spirit, "I find your presence here rather unnecessary. I am perfectly capable of teaching and protecting *my* Baru."

Subaru felt awkward, to say the least. He silently watched, his body stiffening a little, as Beatrice's glare intensified, a tick almost developing on her forehead as she responded snarkily, "Ha! It's amusing that you think I'd trust you to do anything this important alone with *Betty's* Subaru."

Tension was rising and Subaru didn't like it. It was needless to admit, but he was beginning to loathe their distaste in one another. He could tell that things would only get worse from here, so to alleviate the tense atmosphere he yelled: "Dammit! It's cold out here!"

He had said it before Pandora had a chance to retort. It was a stupid yet desperate attempt at getting them to stop fighting, but it seemed to have worked. The two looked at him, both confused and a bit worried. He sighed; at least he distracted them.

"It's cold- I'm cold, so can we please do whatever we need to do and go inside?" He desperately moved his head from side to side, looking at the two of them pleadingly in hopes that they would agree.

They were silent for a moment, exchanging one last hateful look at one another before resettling their eyes on Subaru. Pandora spoke up first, "Yes, I suppose we should begin. This is quite important, after all."

Beatrice didn't respond verbally, instead opting to reluctantly shake her head in agreement. Subaru felt his body start to ease itself, thankful that they wouldn't be arguing anymore; well, for now at least.

He let out a dramatic puff of air, looking at Pandora with a feigned smile of eagerness. "Alright, great! Dora, how do we start?"

She just blinked at him, slightly tilting her head to the side as she eyed him thoroughly. The more she looked at him, the more confused he became. His forced smile fell into something more neutral, as he questioned, "Dora... how exactly are we doing this again?"

She just blinked at him again. Subaru didn't know what to ask next, as he watched her move her head back into a straight position. She put her hand to her chin, feigning thought, as she spoke, "To be honest, I do not know."

Subaru wanted to facepalm at her answer, greatly resisting the urge to actually do so, while his expression was dumbfounded. Though, he did hear a loud smack to his right. There was only one other person with them that could have made that sound.

Sure enough, when he turned his head in that direction, Beatrice had a hand smacked onto the middle of her face. Like contractor, like spirit, he supposed. Beatrice moved her hand away from her face, giving Pandora an annoyed, yet challenging, glare, "So what you mean to tell Betty, is that you don't have the slightest idea of what you're doing?"

Pandora didn't even bother to look at the Great Spirit, "I do know what I am talking about. However, this process can be a bit punctilious."

Beatrice, now even more annoyed than before, let a 'tck' flow out of her mouth. Subaru swore that he heard her mutter 'useless' under her breath, but he ignored it for the greater good. Pandora paid it no mind, thankfully, opting to continue giving her plan a little more forethought. Beatrice also chose not to respond fully in words, rightly recognizing that her patience was running thinner than she'd like.

Subaru kept looking at Pandora nervously, completely unsure as to what he should be doing. He saw when she bit the inside of her mouth in thought, then, soon after, when her face perked up with an idea. She looked at him somewhat eagerly and, truthfully, he didn't know how to reciprocate. "Okay, Baru. I know I have said this a plethora of times before, but you are comparable with the Witch Factors you possess. In fact, you are compatible with all of them."

She paused for a moment, so Subaru nodded to her words. He was, as she said, already aware of that information. Beatrice chose to listen to Pandora's words intently, not letting herself miss a single thing.

"Essentially, this enables you to hold influence over the Witch Factor, rather than the Witch Factor holding influence over you," she continued to explain, doing her best to describe everything thoroughly. Though, upon seeing Subaru's slightly lost expression, she took it upon herself to delve into deeper detail, "This means that, instead of the

Witch Factor altering your mind, or amplifying certain aspects of your personality, you will hold dominion over the Witch Factor and prevent it from greatly affecting you."

Subaru dawned a look of understanding, "I think I get it. Instead of being like the Witches or Archbishops, I can still be my own person. But, if that's the case, why do I still experience drawbacks when using them?"

She lightly pursed her lips, humming for a second in thought, "As I stated yesterday, I believe the issue lies in your lack of a proper bond with them. You need to purify them, shape them into something that better represents you."

Subaru would admit that he didn't fully understand the situation. Well, he moderately grasped some things, but the concept wasn't exactly something he'd experienced before. Authorities, or Witch Factors, were an enigma to him. They were forces of great power that brought a lot of pain and suffering into the world.

They were incredibly hard for him to understand and, if he was being entirely honest with himself, a part of himself really didn't want to. But, for two reasons, he would. He didn't want those abominable powers loose in the world, leaving havoc, pain and death in their wake. Then for Pandora, who wanted to start correcting the wrongs of her past. He'd understand these absurd powers and get stronger for her.

In place of him, Beatrice spoke up, "How do you suppose he should do that? You have done nothing to provide us reliable information on this plan, in fact! How will this work? What does he have to do? There are so many questions you have outright refused to answer!" As if to help relieve some of her anger, she repeatedly stomped on the ground a few times.

Pandora finally moved her head to look at the spirit. It wasn't a look of hostility, or one that incited some sort of challenge; instead it was a simple look of thought, "In that lies the problem. I do not know everything, Beatrice." She turned back to face Subaru, who was slightly surprised by her admission. She began to only address him, "There may be conditions that you need to fulfill before completely bonding to the Authorities. If so, what conditions are there? Does each sin require the same thing, or something different? I can only speculate, but I have no doubt that we will need to be meticulous."

They both heard Beatrice groan in clear frustration, "So, how do you suppose Betty's Subaru does this, then?" Her tone was definitely a bit strained, which fit her expression and movements, but it was also laced with some disappointment as well.

Pandora hummed again, almost unsure of what to say next. "I have some ideas. However, please bear in mind, I do not know everything about the inner workings of an Authority, nor do I even completely understand my own. I am using what limited knowledge I possess to the fullest. Now, Subaru," he perked up at being directly addressed without his nickname, "I would like to test something."

This time it was Beatrice and Subaru, spirit and contractor, that shared a glance after Pandora went silent again. They were both a little confused, not really sure of what they were doing; though, Subaru was the only one that placed faith in Pandora. The fact that she didn't use his nickname when addressing him just went to show that she was taking things seriously. Beatrice, on the other hand, would rather spend another four-hundred years in solitude before placing any faith in her.

"Okay, let us try it this way first. If it does not work, we will try something else," she suddenly proposed. "I want you to focus deep within your body and soul. Reach out and try to connect with the Witch Factors you possess. Close your eyes to focus, if you must."

He didn't quite know how to execute that. Subaru closed his eyes, as Pandora suggested, and began trying to focus his mind. Though, he really didn't know what he was putting that focus on. Instead of finding what he was looking for — which he didn't even know of — his mind became plagued by outside thoughts. Soon enough, it became almost impossible to clear his mind as it became infected with questions,

insecurities, memories... anything that could hold him back. He was reminded of his own failures and self-doubt, becoming affected by their influences.

He kept trying and trying, now completely lost within the maze of his own mind. He didn't know how to navigate it at all. It was if he had taken a wrong turn somewhere, or perhaps he'd never been on the right path since the start. He began to panic, both inwardly and outwardly. He didn't know or understand why he suddenly felt this way, but he didn't exactly have the capacity to think about it either.

He must've been showing his inner turmoil more than he realized, because he felt Pandora slightly tighten her grip on his left hand, whilst simultaneously grabbing his free one with hers. She immediately equalized the grip as she held both of his hands. He felt something else grip at and pull at the bottom of his jacket; it was undoubtedly Beatrice. "Subaru, you must focus. Don't let them influence you; reach within your soul and feel for the unnatural power inside of you. Take control. You can do this, I know you can. If anything happens I- we are right here."

He steadily began easing himself. Her voice and words helped him greatly. To him, her voice sounded calm, relaxing, yet very assuring. It helped him to refocus his mind, clearing away the influences he deemed unimportant and distracting. He wouldn't let them dictate his mind or make him lose sight of what he was doing.

He took a deep breath, remembering Pandora's words to help center his mind on his target. He felt more willful and determined, knowing that he had full support from the people he cared about. He was driven by the desire to do this for them.

As he went deeper and deeper, his mind subtly began to stop rendering outside feelings. The outside breeze, Pandora and Beatrice holding onto him, and not even his own thoughts pierced through. His consciousness only existed as a singularity within himself, now.

That was when he finally felt something. Two things, abnormal and foreign. One felt different than the other, yet they were still so similar. One felt calm and relaxed, almost like a natural, small flowing stream. The other felt almost guarded, yet seemed to possess an insatiable need for more of something. Both were seemingly equally as repulsive, however. It was odd to Subaru, but he kept going.

As he set his focus on them, he felt himself get sucked into something he compared to that of a vortex. His sense of self seemed to almost transcend, as he found himself existing within something completely new. It took a while for him to even realize that he could, somewhat effectively, see, feel and move. The area around him was that of a dark abyssal void, yet he was able to stand on an invisible surface.

He turned his head from side-to-side, seeing nothing but darkness. He lifted his hands, allowing himself to view his limbs. It was all so eerily similar to a certain seal, just without his usual company. In a way, it was a bit depressing for Subaru.

"Welcome, Natsuki Subaru," a voice called from behind him. Subaru immediately turned around in a panic, barely keeping himself steady on his feet as he did so. Before him was a man he recognized very well, green hair, outfit and all. However, instead of possessing a look devoid of life with bulging mad eyes, his face seemed almost younger and more lively, happy even. He held a small, genuine smile upon his face as he raised a hand in a formal greeting, "It is a pleasure to formally meet you. I am Betelgeuse Romanée-Conti, but you can call me Geuse."

Subaru was confused and unsure, yet at the same time incredibly intrigued. He recalled the man in front of him in more ways than one, having heard vague stories from Emilia and Pandora regarding his character. A once nice, benevolent man — or spirit, as Pandora had informed him — that had been corrupted and turned into the madman Subaru once faced. Seeing him now, it looked as if he had gone a hundred years back in time.

Subaru cautiously approached, still a little unsure of the things around him — not that there was very much around him, anyway. Geuse didn't seem to mind, or at the very least he understood Subaru's wariness. He kept that same friendly smile the entire time as he waited for Subaru to reach him. Once he did, Geuse's expression still hadn't changed. Subaru straightened himself, both mentally and physically preparing himself before he spoke, "Um... hello, G-Geuse."

The name felt oddly weird for Subaru to say, which caused him to stutter. The spirit in front of him let out a chuckle at that, which made the boy somewhat embarrassed. It wasn't long before the spirit composed himself once again, the same friendly smile on his face. "Apologies for that," he suddenly spoke sincerely, his body subtly bending forward in a slight bow, surprising Subaru a fair bit.

"Oh, uh... don't worry about it, man," Subaru responded, holding up a hand to signify that everything was okay. Luckily, Geuse got the message and straightened himself out. The two stood together in silence, unsure of what to say to the other. Alrighty, Subaru had it a bit worse, unable to help slouching a little, opening his mouth in an attempt to spark a conversation, "So... how did you even get here?"

Geuse hummed thoughtfully, "Truthfully, I don't know myself." He tilted his head upwards, as if looking for something in the sky. Subaru followed his gaze, finding nothing but the dark abyss that surrounded them. Geuse didn't let the void of silence stay for long, speaking again after a small moment passed, "I don't even necessarily understand who, or what, I am in this place. When you killed me it felt as if I had just stopped existing, but then, all of a sudden, I did again."

Geuse looked back down at Subaru, in which the boy's gaze soon followed. Subaru didn't know how to respond, so he just stayed silent and let the spirit collect his thoughts. His smile dropped, as he began to recall painful memories of the past.

"I appeared here so suddenly. I was alone, still shattered and insane, my memory intact," Geuse held out his palms, lowering his gaze to look at them. "I used to question myself. 'Am I'm the real Betelgeuse, or am I just a mere representation of him, conjured into existence by the Witch Factor of Sloth?' Now, though, with a clear mind, I realize that I exist as the latter."

As he lowered his hands, profusely shaking his head back and forth, Subaru couldn't help but feel for him. Subaru understood Geuse's troubles well. The questions of 'Who are you?' and 'What is your purpose?' was something he was greatly familiar with, because he had asked himself those same questions. He knew what it felt like to be unsure of yourself, to doubt your existence and your place in the world.

He recalled what both Emilia and Pandora had described about the spirit's past. He felt that Geuse's fate was immensely undeserved, and as a result Subaru himself felt guilty. He felt as if he'd robbed Geuse of the happy ending he deserved and needed by killing him. Subaru leaned his head down, looking off to the side and letting out a deep exhale. "I'm sorry," he suddenly said. "If... If I'd known, I would- I would've at least tried to- to-..."

Subaru trailed off, losing his words. It was odd; he felt so compassionate about Geuse even though he never met the man, formally anyway, until now. He found himself sympathizing with him, understanding his outlook and troubles. He didn't exactly know why, but he didn't regret it. Subaru thought that, perhaps, he saw a little bit of himself in Geuse, and maybe that was why he felt like he understood so much about him.

After wallowing to himself for a few seconds, Subaru suddenly felt a hand grasp his shoulder with a light and reassuring touch. He looked up, finding Geuse looking at him with a warm smile once again. "Don't trouble yourself, my friend. You have already helped me in more ways than I could have ever hoped. So, for what it's worth, thank you."

Subaru didn't know what to think. Geuse's voice sounded so sincere and honest, yet Subaru didn't understand why. What had he done to help him? He'd killed him, that's all

he could remember. If he'd done anything else I'd significance to help Geuse, then it was lost on him.

He wanted an answer; he wanted to understand what Geuse was talking about. He felt like a failure as he looked at yet another person he failed to save, unable to formulate any words of his own. Though, the spirit seemed to recognize his look and took it upon himself to fill the void of silence.

"You remind me of someone I used to know, four-hundred years ago. In fact, you are exactly like him in many ways. He gave me a purpose, just as you give me one now," he revealed, making Subaru inwardly reel back in surprise. "As far as I'm concerned, there was no way to heal my broken mind. You had no knowledge nor the proper tools to even attempt to help me. Destroying me was the best option at hand, and I do not fault you for doing so in the slightest."

Subaru straightened himself as Petelgeuse spoke, listening intently and following along with his words. Subaru found himself relatively dumbfounded and had many questions he wanted to ask. They overloaded his mind, so he recomposed himself and began picking them apart one by one. Eventually, he chose only one to ask, "How could I have given you a purpose? What purpose could I have possibly given you, now that you're... dead."

Geuse's smile seemed to widen, his eyes seemingly beginning to water. Subaru could've sworn that the spirit was about to cry tears of joy. "My purpose is to help you, Subaru-sama," he exclaimed in an ecstatic tone, his words surprising Subaru even more. "Not only have you freed me from my tormented mind, but you have lifted my burdens as well!"

"Wait, hold on! Where did this 'sama' title come from?!" Subaru exclaimed in an exaggerated tone, before sighing. "I beg you, please stop being so cryptic..."

Petelgeuse only laughed at the expense of Subaru, wiping his eyes to rid them of any forming tears. "My apologies; I truly don't mean to be as secretive as you say. I suppose we should start with why you're here, since I am quite positive that this is not a charity visit."

He laughed nervously, unconsciously rubbing the back of his head, "Oh, whoops, heh~" Subaru refocused himself rather quickly, remembering why exactly he'd found and came to this place. "Well, you're exactly right. I'm here because of the Witch Factors. I've gotta purify them, or bond with them, I think. I'm not really sure how to do that though, so I'm in here kind of blind."

"Ah," Petelgeuse uttered quickly, closing his eyes in a content and satisfied manner. "I see. I can certainly help you with your troubles here. I can also say for certain that, for the Witch Factor of Sloth, you have no issues."

Subaru looked incredibly relieved and thankful, letting out a stress relieving breath. "You don't know how good it feels to hear that. I've been stressed this whole time, trying to figure out what I'm doing." The spirit let himself chuckle in minor amusement at Subaru's expense once again, reopening his eyes. "But you said that I have no issues with the Sloth Factor. What did you mean?"

"The meaning is within the statement itself, Subaru-sama," Geuse mentioned, taking Subaru aback by using his new title again, in addition with his statement. "You have no issues with the Sloth Factor because you have already adapted to it. You have altered it, changed it, into something new."

Subaru blinked a few times, "Wait, what? How? I didn't even do anything special, how the hell could I have done that?"

Geuse let himself lightly laugh again. At this point, Subaru believed that the spirit was starting to view him as some kind of special entertainment. "In most basic aspects, you don't need to do anything special for the sin to adapt to you. However, they do respond

to your will, resolve and feelings. With those factors, you have definitively proven that you are anything but slothful, Subaru-sama."

Subaru let himself think, genuinely shocked and surprised at the revelation. He did his best to recall certain memories, desperately searching for the deciding factor in this sudden change. He began muttering to himself, "The last time I used Invisible Providence, it gave me negative side-effects. And the last time I used it for anything was before... wait, don't tell me." He looked back up at Geuse with a questioning look, speaking loud enough for the spirit to hear, "It was the seal, wasn't it. It was when I put myself in the seal with Pandora!"

Geuse smiled at Subaru's confident answer, "Your perceptiveness is astounding, Subaru-sama." He drew his eyes upward, looking up into the empty void once more. "Diligence and resolve to act, the exact opposite of sloth. Self-sacrifice is a perfect representation of that, having been willing to seclude yourself for all eternity with an enemy, all to protect others." He looked back at Subaru, "Your ultimate act of selflessness, while not the entire deciding factor, was what finalized your full bond to this Witch Factor. Sloth is now yours to command."

Subaru was beyond shocked, at this point. It made sense, the more he thought about it. In hindsight, he probably should have tried to use the Authority beforehand, but he had no reason to think that things had even changed. He thought that, perhaps, it was better that he came here first, anyway. Subaru still had many questions to ask, though, "Wait, is that why you're not insane right now?"

The sane spirit nodded his head, "Indeed. Once the Sloth Witch Factor fully adapted to you, I reverted back to my previous form. You could say that this is my 'purified self', if that is what suits you."

Subaru understood now, or at least he was beginning to. Though, he still had many questions to ask, "What about the other sins? Will it be the same for all of them?"

At that Geuse's expression took on more of a neutral stance, "I'm not entirely certain. I'm afraid that I can only speak definitively for my sin. However, I'm entirely certain that you will have little to no trouble with some of the other sins."

Subaru thought to himself for a moment, "From the way you make it sound, I just need to accept the virtue of each sin, right?"

"I would say that is an oversimplification," he suddenly paused, becoming a bit hesitant to speak more. "While that is indeed a major factor in solidifying your bond, other factors cannot be entirely ruled out. Witch Factors, and by extension their Authorities, defy the rules of the world in many different ways, after all. Given so, each sin may or may not be satiated by different things."

"I get it," Subaru was thankful to understand more about these Witch Factors now. While they were similar, each of them acted very differently. While he had to show his diligence for sloth, it may not be as simple as showing his charity for greed. The Greed Witch Factor may want more from him, or less. He supposed he'd have to confront the representation of the Witch Factor to find out for sure.

He put his hands on his sides in thought. "Say, what's the representation of Greed like, anyway? Is he... you know?"

Geuse immediately recoiled, becoming increasingly nervous as he stammered, "W-Well, he's... I think you have an idea, already." Subaru realized what the spirit was saying, sighing in his own nervousness.

"It's rude to talk about someone behind their back."

At the sound of a new voice, both Subaru and Geuse tensed and turned toward the source. As if emerging from the depths of the void, a figure began to reveal itself from the darkness. Its body glowed like theirs, illuminating itself to stand out against the

black void around them. The more the figure emerged, the more recognizable it became.

The form of a white haired man, wearing a pure-white greca-style overcoat that reached down to his ankles, occupied the space opposite of them. His hands lay relaxed by his sides; holding an expression that displayed moderate annoyance, his features meshing together in a way that made Subaru feel slightly anxious.

"Have you nothing to say? You blatantly, rudely talked about me behind my back and you have nothing to say for yourself? One would think that you'd have better manners than this. Seriously, did your parents not raise you correctly? You need to be taught how-"

"I almost forgot how irritating this was..." Subaru mumbled under his breath, pressing a hand to his face, subsequently interrupting the man's rant.

"Huh?! Not only did you rudely talk about me behind my back, but now you interrupt me as well?! How dare you interrupt me, Regulus Corneas! This goes against my right of free speech!"

"What're you even doing here, anyway? I thought I had to go to you separately, or something..."

"Now you violate my right of free movement?! How dare you!" His voice began more edged, his expression further contorting to convey his rage. "Who taught you that this was acceptable?! Who gave you permission to violate another human being's rights! Truly despicable! Disgusting!"

Subaru felt someone poke his shoulder, so he turned his head back to the side. Geuse looked at him worriedly, his expression nervous and uncertain. "Subaru-sama, we can all exist within this area. His sudden appearance wasn't unlikely to happen. I would also suggest that we refrain from angering him too much-"

"You!" Regulus, in his anger, thrust his pointed hand forward, directing it at Geuse. "How dare you collaborate with this disgusting excuse of a human being." He lowered his arm, closing his eyes and clenching his fists. "You're an utter disgrace."

Subaru stepped in front of Geuse, who began stepping back in unease. The raven-haired boy's glare cut daggers through the darkness, hitting the Archbishop head-on. "You're one to talk. You speak about being a disgrace, but look at you. The path you chose is full of blood. You forced innocent girls to become your wives, then you mistreated them, hurt them and made them suffer. You talk about your rights being violated, but yet you stomp all over the rights of others."

That last statement seemed to break Regulus, as his face reeled back and contorted in pure, unyielding rage. "Such disrespect! Such insolence!" He then began to march forward, his own glare beginning to clash with Subaru's. "I, Regulus Corneas, am above that of a mere normal human! I will not stand for this any longer! You have violated my rights for the last time! I will dispose of you at once!"

That was when, in a fast change of pace, he suddenly stopped his march and bent his legs. He slightly lowered himself toward the 'ground', before rapidly extending them in a monstrous leap forward. Regulus launched himself high into the 'air', Subaru and Petelgeuse both tracking him with their eyes as he began his descent toward them.

The two barely had enough time to react, kicking themselves back in two different directions to avoid Regulus. As they skid to a halt, Regulus landed with a powerful and devastating impact that would have created a crater had it happened on any normal grounds.

Subaru grit his teeth, bringing himself into a defensive stance as Regulus moved forward once again. The distance between them closed quickly, as the Archbishop launched himself forward. His arm was outstretched, hand open in an attempt to grab

Subaru by the face. The boy barely had a chance to move his head to the side, avoiding Regulus' grab.

Subaru lowered his body, one of his legs shifting to the side and dragging along the ground in a smooth sweep. It made contact with Regulus' own legs, successfully taking him off the 'ground' and putting him on his back. The Archbishop groaned as he hit the 'ground', with Subaru immediately taking advantage of the moment to get on top of him and prepare a hard hit to the head.

Regulus narrowed his eyes just as Subaru lowered his fist with impressive speed. The boy's fist was instantly repelled, throwing him back a bit as Regulus thrust a palm into his chest. Subaru found himself being thrown back, high into the air. For a moment, he thought he'd never hit the 'ground' again. However, he did; the landing was anything but kind, landing stomach first and essentially taking the wind out of him — somehow — as he struggled to get back up.

Regulus easily picked himself up, dusting himself off as if he'd dirtied his clothing. Seeing Subaru's downed form, he began making his way over. The boy lifted his gaze, tiredly. He saw Petelgeuse, standing on his own in a separate area of this mysterious space, averting his gaze in an attempt to not watch. "Geuse..."

The spirit had heard Subaru's desperate plea, finding some sense of willpower within himself to look at the fallen boy. "I'm sorry, Subaru-sama. I know that this may be slothful of me, but I cannot interfere with this confrontation."

Subaru didn't know how to process that statement, nor did he notice that Regulus was now right next to him. The Archbishop planted his foot on Subaru's back, twisting and turning it as Subaru groaned in pain. "Disgusting. You had the gall to disrespect my rights, yet now you grovel beneath me like a pathetic insect. What a waste of space, you are. You deserve nothing of what you have. You take, take and take from others yet never give back, like a leech. Truly deplorable. Disgusting. *Greedy*."

Subaru's eyes widened at Regulus' monologue. He tried his best to register those words, but Regulus wasn't letting up. "You don't deserve the affection you receive. Pandora-sama has shown you her grace yet you don't give back in with same vigor? You don't deserve my mercy." He lifted his foot up, before heavily bringing it back down onto Subaru's back. The boy let out a loud groan of pain as his body flailed in response.

Then, in a sudden surge of determination, Subaru grit his teeth and forced his hand behind his back in a desperate attempt to grab the Archbishop's ankle. It was repelled instantly, the effort only making Regulus more peeved as his face contorted into one of relative disgust. It looked as if the white haired man would spit on the pathetic boy beneath him at any moment.

Regulus let a "tsk" escape from his lips as he bent down, extending an arm out toward Subaru's head and grabbing his hair in his hand. The Archbishop took his foot off of the boy's back, lifting him up so that the boy could clearly see his expression.

"You're like a pathetic, *greedy* child. A repulsive little leech that just keeps *taking* things. Unworthy of the love you receive. You make me angry. You make me fill with unbridled rage. I do not deserve this, for I am a perfect individual. I shall not be tainted by your abominable attitude. I wish to not see your face again."

With those words, Regulus reeled his arm back and thrust it downward with intense force. Subaru closed his eyes, doing his best to brace as his face collided directly with the 'ground'.

He found himself lightly jolting forward, heavy yet steady breaths circulating through his mouth. When he reopened his eyes, he winced. The sudden revelation of a bright light above him made him recoil and squint his eyes. At some point, he closed them in order to help himself recompose. It took what felt like a while for him to gather his bearings,

or, rather, his sense of mind. It felt like he'd just even kicked out of himself, with phantom pain lingering throughout his body.

After a while, he came to realize that his head was resting on something soft, yet comfortable. A soothing, consecutive and relaxing motion flowed through his hair. He gathered some will to open his eyes and, although afraid of being blinded again, he did so. What greeted his gaze was not the blinding light of the sun, but someone's face.

As he looked up at the individual, whom he noticed was a girl, he noticed that her face created a shadow that protected him from the light. Her long, platinum hair was beautifully carried by the wind. He saw her expression, showing her worry with a clear frown and eyes that traced him with concern. He thought it looked cute.

He blinked a few more times to further adjust his eyes. When his mind eventually wrapped itself around his current situation, he was able to recognize who this was, "...Dora?"

She let out a light puff of air, one that he could slightly feel against his skin. Her eyes softened a bit, her mouth slightly opening and closing as her hand continued its movements through his hair, "Yes, Baru, it is me."

They both went silent. Pandora pulled her head back, slouching posture a little. Subaru let himself relax as well, his eyes finally adjusting to the sudden light around him. He merely stared up into the bright blue sky, watching the clouds pass above them.

He took a deep breath, "What happened?"

She took a deep breath too, "You scared us for a while. You just suddenly lost consciousness."

He didn't speak for another moment, taking the time to properly process what she said. He sniffed, before letting out a big exhale, "I'm on your lap, aren't I?"

"Indeed you are," her answer was immediate.

"It's... very comfortable."

He heard her lightly laugh. It was a sweet, angelic laugh that he loved to hear. "Thank you."

"How long was I out?" He asked after a few seconds.

"Not too terribly long. An hour, perhaps two."

"What about Beako, where is she?"

"Not far. She is by the mansion, looking into something. She should be back shortly."

He momentarily paused, collecting his thoughts, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Troubling you."

"There is nowhere I would rather be."

They went silent again. Subaru kept his gaze focused on the sky above, feeling as Pandora continued to soothingly play with his hair. He lost himself to his own thoughts as he relaxed to her touch, doing his best to remember everything that had happened.

He had been completely, utterly beaten. That much he remembered fluently. Had that happened in the real world, and not in whatever mindscape he found himself in, he would have surely died. But that wasn't what was important.

Subaru distinctly remembered Regulus' degrading speech. It struck a chord with him; it wasn't a good chord, either. In fact, it was more of a chord that had broken down over time and eventually snapped under the pressure. It didn't feel, or sound, right at all. His words bothered and shook Subaru down to his core, forcing him to reconsider everything that led up to this very moment.

Subaru searched deeply within himself. It was like turning the pages of an old, dusty dictionary as he searched for the meaning of his own thoughts and feelings. After a while, he flipped a page and found what he was looking for. Regulus' words didn't bother him because they were a part of some outrageous, false accusation. No, they bothered him because those words were true.

He swallowed nothing but his own spit, letting his breath gradually get heavier while his mind properly took hold of his emotions. He felt sad and disappointed in himself. But, most of all, he held an overwhelming sense of guilt.

He opened his mouth in an attempt to speak these thoughts to her, but closed it in hesitation. He didn't have the courage to say anything, even though he very much wanted to. He supposed that, because he had bottled his true feelings for so long with Return by Death, it was nothing new to him. It didn't make things any easier, though.

As her fingers slid in and out of his hair, his thoughts drifted to more so focus on her. He couldn't help but look away from the sky, shifting his eyes to her face. His expression softened, yet his eyes hardened as various different thoughts clashed together in his head. Eventually, he was able to barely garner enough courage to open his mouth again. He began to sit himself up, murmuring, "Look, Dora, I-"

He was immediately interrupted when Pandora placed her other hand gently on his forehead, lightly pushing him back down onto her lap. She leaned her head forward to look at him more directly, "Do not sit up. Relax."

Subaru felt inclined to do as she said, starting to relax his previously stiffening body. He sighed both in contentment and in disappointment, though the latter was mainly toward himself. Swallowing again, his lips parted for him to speak, "Dora, do you... are you..."

Her expression became one similar to confusion as he tripped over his own words. He sighed again, feeling hopeless as he continuously failed to express his thoughts to her. Even so, she continued to caress his hair with those same loving motions, "Baru, are you alright?"

He let out a large breath of air from his nose, slightly shaking his head from side-to-side as if to say "no". She pursed her lips in worry, "Would you like to talk about it?"

His gaze averted from her, directing themselves into the sky above, "It's hard."

She blinked, but smiled, "A lot of things are. But, despite how difficult some things may be, they can still be conquered."

At that, he actually moved his gaze back to her. His eyes met hers, "That was some unexpected philosophical talk from you."

She softly laughed, "I learned it from the best."

He rolled his eyes, letting out breath in the form of a huff, "Are you sure that this person wasn't just some moronic idiot? Someone who, I dunno, doesn't know what he's talking about? Someone that doesn't deserve the things he has because he doesn't appreciate them enough?"

"You should not be saying those things about yourself." At that, her hand finally stopped running through his hair. Instead, it perched itself just above his forehead. Her thumb gently graced its surface, lovingly caressing it with its touch, "Why are you saying these things? Can you talk to me, please?"

He found himself hesitating again, genuinely unsure of what to say next. She was practically begging him to talk to her, to be open about how he felt, yet he couldn't. Words, although at the tip of his tongue, seemed entirely lost to him. He felt guilty at the prospect, looking at her worried face as she caressed his forehead. Maybe that was what motivated him to open his mouth again, but he wasn't sure, "I... I feel like I don't deserve this."

She merely hummed, not answering right away. He didn't mind, the silence was calming, though the stress of her imminent response didn't weigh lightly. "Why do you think that?" she asked simply.

He too didn't answer right away. Truthfully, he wasn't too sure of the answer himself. He knew what his feelings were, but he didn't know why they existed in the way that they did. It was odd, and something he quite frankly disliked thinking about, but he pulled through and did it anyway. His lips parted, not answering her question but instead asking his own, "Have you ever... had doubts?"

She didn't answer him, instead choosing to contemplate her own thoughts to herself. It worried Subaru a little. He felt uneasy and nervous, not knowing what she could be thinking about. When she opened her mouth, she too didn't answer him, instead similarly choosing to ask her own question, "Why do you ask?"

It was immediately clear to him that she wouldn't be answering his question. She'd seen through him, knowing that there was an underlying reason for all of this. She was reading him like a book and putting him right where she wanted. Had the roles been reversed, he was sure that he'd have done the same to her. That was what an eternity together allowed them to do, he supposed.

He started carefully thinking to himself for a few seconds before responding, "I guess... I'm afraid?"

The statement was delivered like a question, something which Pandora didn't miss. She decided to push a little deeper, "What are you afraid of, then?"

It was a good question, one that made Subaru both inwardly praise and curse her perceptiveness. She was making him think and talk more about his problems, which was a good thing; he knew that, too. Truthfully, however, he didn't quite know how to answer her question. He didn't really want to think about it, either. In a way, doing so hurt him.

In the end, he did his best to respond, "I'm afraid of... I'm afraid of..." He stuttered his words, digging deep within himself for an answer to his own feelings. Why was he so scared? What reason did he have to be afraid, especially now? He did eventually find the answer, "I'm afraid of... this."

His statement confused her. She kept her worried face, pursing her lips again while she slightly tilted her head to the side, "I do not understand."

He nervously averted his eyes from her, but he didn't forget how they looked. Her beautiful, blue eyes openly showed how much she cared for him. They carried her worry, concern and love. He didn't look into them while he spoke, despite how much he wanted to, "While... While I was in there, I was told some things. At first, I didn't... I didn't know what they meant. Now, after some thought, I figured out what they mean."

As far as he knew, she didn't react. She stayed silent and unchanging, patiently letting him speak his mind, so he continued, "I guess... I'm afraid of being loved. Not just that, but I'm afraid of giving it, too." He finally said it, but that wasn't all. "I told you about my life before coming here, how my relationship with my parents was. I wanted them to yell at me, to hate me, but they never did. I never understood why. Then I lost them." He paused, taking a few seconds to digest his own words. When he felt ready enough, he took a deep breath to prepare, "All because I was summoned here. The source of my suffering," he dryly chuckled a little.

"Then I fell in love with Emilia, at first glance too. I thought that she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen," he continued, shifting the subject of the conversation a bit. While he slightly reminisced of his first days in this world, he noticed her hand falter and twitch. It only lasted a second, before it resumed its consecutive strokes on his forehead. He brushed off the incident and kept going, "Despite all of the pain this world caused me, I still had her. It helped. I even confessed to her after a while, but... she never gave me a real answer, as you already know."

He felt her hand twitch again, before resuming its light strokes. He didn't think of it too much again, instead opting to continue speaking his mind to her, "I thought that I had finally gotten over this, but I guess I didn't." He dryly laughed to himself again, finding his own suffering moderately amusing. "Learn to love myself," he snorted, this time. "What a joke. How could I even try to love myself when... when the people that love me and the people that I love... they always seem to leave me."

Subaru scoffed, sniffing a little as words finally ceased flowing, letting himself rest a little. Pandora probably didn't like the fact that he was talking so poorly about himself, as evident from her occasional twitches and jerks in movement. Unfortunately, he still wasn't done; he still had more to say. It was something he wasn't looking forward to doing, but he wanted to be honest with her. She deserved that much from him, at least.

Subaru was actually surprised at her continued silence. He would have expected her to interject, or something of that nature, by now. Instead, she kept herself still and attentively listened to his seemingly endless rant. It was appreciated, in more ways than she likely knew.

When he formulated his words again, he continued, "I guess what I'm trying to say is... I don't think I deserve this. Your love, I mean. I'm unworthy of it. How could I be? I've done nothing but... but take your affection, and yet... yet..." he trailed off, unable to finish his statement.

"You still have some doubts," Pandora spoke up, taking him by surprise. Subaru didn't look at her, keeping his eyes on the clouds above, watching them intently.

He gave one, small nod whilst keeping his head on her lap, "...Yeah. I just... I don't know. Maybe this doesn't make sense, but I can't help but feel like this is... unreal. I feel like, at any moment, what we have will just disappear, I guess. Like it'll just be ripped away like everything else."

Subaru was truly unsure of how to properly convey the next part of his inner turmoil. A part of him worried that, if he didn't word things the right way, she could get really upset. So, he took another breath and parted his lips to speak again, clearly noticing how much more nervous he became. With careful words, he began, "Our love was born as a result of being trapped in the seal for so long. We always glared at one another from across the room. We absolutely *hated* each other. Then, we started talking, bonding and becoming closer. Eventually, that led to us falling in love."

Her grip on him became firmer, as if making sure he wasn't going anywhere. She was nervous too, it seemed. His lips parted, "You knew so much about me, and I knew so much about you. You ended up surpassing Emilia and Rem by a longshot." He lightly laughed, but he didn't know why. He stopped soon after he started, sighing in discontentment, "I guess what I'm getting at is this: what if our love was just something born out of our own desperation? What if it just ends up... going away, after a while. I just... I don't want that to happen, I don't want to love again and have it suddenly disappear like everything else, so... I'm scared."

The hand on his head finally stopped moving. He froze up. He was finally finished. He'd spoken his mind, his true thoughts and feelings lying bare for her to see. It had been hard, but he had done it. That didn't ease his uneasiness, though. A part of him still feared her reaction.

He couldn't believe it at first when he heard the start of stifled laughter. When it became more prominent, his gaze, at long last, moved away from the clouds to look at her.

Eyes going wide, mouth slightly agape, he looked at her shocked. Pandora's face was etched in amusement as she laughed.

Before he had time to truly ponder on his self-doubt, her laughter began to subside and her eyes drifted to his. He saw her smile, the same as it had always been, but with something more sewn into it. It was captivating, in a way, "Oh, Subaru."

Spoken in a soft voice, he was entranced. It was like she was calling out to him, reaching a hand forward for him to take and firmly grab onto. He really wanted to, but he hesitated. However, that didn't stop her, "I am sorry for laughing. I just find this to be a bit... well, ironic."

He was confused, now. What was she talking about? He wanted to ask, he wanted to question her, but when he opened his mouth to do so he could never formulate the sentence. He was rendered literally speechless. He couldn't speak, no matter how hard he tried or wanted to.

If she noticed his trouble speaking, she didn't give any indication of it. Her eyes softened, though, "I hope you do not misunderstand. Earlier you asked if I had doubts. The answer to that question is yes. I find this ironic, because I have considered the things as you."

He stopped trying to speak after that. Instead, he began focusing entirely on her words. She looked at him adoringly, starting to pet his hair with her hand again, "Subaru, you wear your heart on your sleeve. You are kind; too kind, at that. But, you are also not afraid to express your hate. I should know, since I was on the receiving end of that hatred of yours for a long time."

He blinked, feeling a bit bad about that. He had, indeed, spent a lot of time sending his hate at her whilst in the seal. "To be fair, I had done the same to you," she stated suddenly, as if reading his mind, in an attempt to make him feel less guilty. "As you said, our hatred did eventually subside until it was completely null. We then became closer and then fell in love. You are correct, when you say it was born from rather... unhealthy circumstances. However, I do not believe that dictates our overall relationship."

He could only blink, as she continued before he had a chance to think, "Love is... odd. Before you, I could not understand the hearts of others. I had never felt such a thing as love, either. Something so genuine and pure; something that makes you feel so full and comfortable. Of course, there are a lot of things I still do not know; but, I know my own heart. I know that my heart beats for you to the extent that it physically pains me."

Guilt filled him at that moment. He suddenly felt compelled to say something, anything, to her, "Dora... I-I-"

He was immediately interrupted when she put a finger to his mouth, effectively shushing him. "Do not speak, just listen," she just removed her finger, keeping her smile. He closed his mouth, reluctantly complying with her request. Her eyes softened, looking at him as lovingly as she could, "I feel this way whenever I am with you. It never goes away. I may not fully understand these feelings, but I do know now that this is love. I truly, completely love you, Natsuki Subaru."

Her confession made his heart speed up. It was already going fast, but now it felt as if it were going into overdrive. Funnily enough, his heart beat to the point that it hurt him, too. He had never heard such a genuine, heartfelt confession of love since... Well, it's definitely been a while.

She averted her gaze from him before he could ponder on his feelings more, "You speak as if you are unworthy of me? That was amusing. If anyone is unworthy of receiving love, it is *me*." He really, really wanted to protest that statement. However, he was compelled to stay silent as she quickly continued, "I have caused so much pain, so much suffering," she looked back at him. Her eyes changed, now containing more of her repressed sadness, "I even took you away from your friends, your family... yet you

chose me. You still choose me. That is something I still do not understand, but it makes me happy."

He really wanted to reach out and hug her. He wanted to tell her that it was alright, that he was there for her. He wanted to rub her back and let her cry on his shoulder. But he didn't, even though it pained him. He knew that he shouldn't, not yet, anyway.

She used her free hand to wipe her eyes, stopping herself from crying. She shook her head a little, as if to regain her composure, before centering her gaze back onto him, "I have thought so many times that what we have will just disappear, that the love I have finally acquired after all of these years will vanish. But... I also consider what has led us here, to this moment, and what we have done together." She paused for a moment, letting her words sink in.

Her eyes met his with a flurry of emotions. Her love, sadness, and happiness too. That was how he knew that she truly spoke from her heart, "If this was not real... If this was just temporary, something only brought into existence because of what we went through, I believe that you wouldn't be with me now. You would not have hugged me, kissed me, and agreed to start a family with me. That is why I believe in us; it is why I believe that what we have is truly real."

He stared blankly at her, unresponsive to her words. She took his hand in hers, both of them feeling the other's respective coolness and warmth. They both enjoyed that feeling, instinctively intertwining their fingers into their almost iconic hand-holding state as their palms pressed themselves together.

Subaru was traversing within his own mind, fully taking in her words. She was absolutely right, and he didn't need to think much of it. He listened to his heart. He let it guide him and his thoughts, feeling it beat against his chest in constant rapid motions.

That was when his heart led him to putting his free hand behind her head, her eyes widening in surprise as he began bringing it down. He moved his head up to meet her halfway, their lips sealing together in a sloppy yet magical embrace. Pandora didn't let her surprise last, quickly closing her eyes and letting herself enjoy the kiss they equally shared. For a moment, their heartbeats almost seem to synchronize to their captivating love. They let their hearts act for them and neither of them could complain, nor did they ever want to.

They broke off sooner than either of them would have liked. Subaru gently rested his head back onto her lap, whilst Pandora moved hers ever so slightly back to its original position. She looked at him with her mouth slightly agape and confused, yet she was also satisfied with his action.

"You're absolutely right, Dora," he started, nervously shifting his eyes from here. "I was being an idiot. I didn't consider your feelings, and I didn't think about-"

She put a finger to his lips, shutting him up quickly. Once he looked at her again, her lips formed into a genuine and forgiving smile, "We both had the same concerns. So, if anything, we are both idiotic fools."

He laughed genuinely at her comment, which she enjoyed hearing, "I guess you're right." He smiled at her, which did little to help her heart settle down. "Though, I still think that it's a bit scummy to talk about these things *now*."

She hummed, "Why do you say that?"

He kept his eyes away from her, feeling a sense of nervousness creep up within him, "Well, considering... you know."

She thought for a moment, before humming again, "Ah, I understand." She paused for a moment, cupping his cheek with her free hand, "I must say, however, if you did leave me... I would do whatever I can to get you back."

He smiled, touched by her statement, "Thanks."

She noticed his moderately embarrassed tone, slightly enjoying it herself, "I know that you would do it for me, too." She made sure to address something else, as well, "I should add, I will kill any other woman that tries to take you away from me."

He barely stifled a small laugh at the serious declaration, "Who do you think I am, some kind of harem protagonist?"

Familiar with his terminology, she responded, "How could I know? Maybe Natsuki Subaru is some kind of woman swindler."

That time Subaru actually laughed, looking back into her eyes. It felt almost alien for someone to pay homage to stereotypes from his home and actually went along with his references, "Yeah, because I have the greatest looks around. So many women just can't wait to get a piece of me."

She chose not to think about how untrue his statement actually was, especially when it concerned other girls, instead choosing to rub her thumb along his cheek affectionately, "You look great to me, and I know that I always want a piece of you."

He blushed at her comment, letting himself drown within the depths of her ocean-blue eyes. In a sudden moment of seriousness, he looked at her sincerely, eyes showing his care and appreciation. "Thanks, Dora... I really needed this."

She kept her genuine, caring look, "I should be the one thanking you, for continuing to stay with me. But, you are welcome. I would do it again, anytime, as I know you would for me." He nodded his head to her words, agreeing with her statement. In her head, she swore to protect him. If anything, or anyone, attempted to harm him, she would return it a hundredfold.

As Pandora made her silent vow, Subaru made his own. He was afraid of losing her, but, now, he wouldn't let that stop him from openly showing just how much he loved her. For this he swore, he was going to give her as much love as he could in any way he possibly could. This included others, too; he was sure that Beatrice was feeling a little left out, since he hadn't given her much affection recently.

This vow started now, as he put his hand behind her head and brought her down for another kiss. She gladly reciprocated, the two of them gently pressing their lips together in a more organized and passionate way. It didn't last as long as the last one, unfortunately, which left them both feeling somewhat unsatisfied. But, Subaru only smiled at her after they separated, "I promise, Dora, I won't ever leave or let you go."

She was surprised by the suddenness of his words, only able to blink, at first. He even tightened his hold on her hand to emphasize his point, something which she returned in full. She happily smiled back, "And I you, Baro."

They only continued looking into each other's eyes for a very limited time. Subaru had been the one to break off their moment, "As much as I *really* want to stay, I have someone I need to go beat up and show my resolve to. You won't go anywhere, will you?"

Pandora rapidly blinked a few times, which Subaru found cute. In a minor state of confusion, she asked, "I- Well, of course I will not go anywhere, I will keep holding you here, but-"

"Great! I'll be back soon... I hope."

With that, he interrupted her and closed his eyes. It didn't take long for him to lose consciousness again, his head becoming somewhat heavier on her lap. Pandora sighed, her eyes examining his sleeping face.

"How long have you been there?" The platinum-haired girl spoke up.

"Not very long. Betty saw you flirting and did not wish to interrupt, I suppose," Beatrice responded in her unmistakable tone and voice, all whilst walking closer. Though, by the way she spoke, it was clear she was at least a fair bit disgusted.

"Should I be thanking you?" Pandora snarkily asked.

"No. Being away from your flirting benefits me as much as it does you, in fact," the spirit made a sound to convey her disgust, something which Pandora felt moderately insulted by. "But you can thank Betty for her aid, and for the fact that I cleaned the bedsheets, I suppose," she shivered, before regaining her composure. "I have found a lead."

At the spirit's words, Pandora directed her gaze to the girl in interest, "So, you can do it?"

Beatrice nodded, adding with a frustrated tone, "I need some things. We have nothing that is required around here, so Betty will have to go out looking."

Pandora nodded back, acknowledging the smaller girl's statement. However, the taller of the two had a suspicion, "When will you leave?"

"In a moment, I suppose."

"Why? Will you not stay until he awakes, at least?" Pandora didn't miss a beat with her response.

Beatrice looked up, narrowing her eyes at the former Witch, "Why do you care? You should be rejoicing, in fact. You can help him all on your own and, since I will be gone, all of Betty's Subaru's attention will be on you."

"Because it will upset him. You know this, too," she answered without delay and doubt. "As I told you before, I care for you as an extension of him. I do not wish to see him hurt or upset. He loved you. He would not want you to leave without saying goodbye."

Beatrice grumbled, clearly unhappy as she contemplated Pandora's words, "Fine. Betty will stay." The spirit noticed Pandora's expression turn into one of satisfaction — since she successfully called Beatrice out on her soon-to-be actions — while the Great Spirit made her way over to the pair. She sat by Subaru's head, her own head shifting downward so that she could gaze at his sleeping face.

They both sat there in silence for a while, neither of the two willing to break it. Both merely enjoyed being within the presence of the person they cared for most. As Beatrice looked down at the form of her sleeping contractor, watching as his stomach moved steadily up and down in compliance with his breath, she was reminded of a sad fact.

Beatrice herself let in a few heavy puffs of air before getting it all out, allowing her mind to realize the difference between both her and Subaru. Even Pandora was also different from him, in the same one crucial aspect they both shared. The Great Spirit opened and closed her mouth a few times, hesitating to speak. Eventually, through her own will, she found herself able to, "Are you not worried?"

Pandora didn't pick up her gaze but, then again, neither had Beatrice. They both kept their eyes on the boy below them, but Pandora did see the spirit's hands start caressing his hair, "What do you inquire about? Is there something I need to be concerned about?"

Beatrice breathed one heavy breath, "Him," she stated firmly. "He... He is not like us, in fact. He is mortal. He will die, leave Betty and... and you, too. Someday. Are you not worried about that? About having him leave you?"

That made Pandora finally pick up her gaze, if only just a little. Beatrice followed her lead, having also lightly picked her head up. The platinum-haired girl looked at the

Great Spirit with analytical eyes, but nothing more. In a way it surprised Beatrice, since she'd expected more of a... sinister look, of sorts.

When Pandora slightly shook her head to each side, Beatrice was surprised, "No, I am not. If I had been, I would have brought the subject to his attention sooner." Before the Great Spirit could open her mouth to argue, the former Witch continued, "Even if he remembers or not, he will not have to worry about his mortality."

"What- What are you talking about? He's mortal, in fact! A normal human! The fact remains that he'll die! He- He'll leave us, someday!"

"I was not done talking," Pandora interrupted, deadpanning at the Great Spirit. Though, seconds after, Pandora developed a cocky, knowing expression, "Also, was that an 'us' that I just heard?" Said spirit became flustered, stuttering her own words until she stopped making noise completely. The former Witch had to make an effort to keep herself from laughing, but continued nonetheless, "In any case, his mortality is not a concern right now. For reasons that I, for one, believed would be quite obvious."

Beatrice began stuttering again, searching her own mind for possible answers based on the knowledge she already knew, "You don't mean to suggest that-"

"His Witch Factors will keep him alive, yes," Pandora interrupted, sighing. "The Witches and Archbishops are, or were, capable of living for centuries because of this. I know that I have told this to Baru already, but perhaps I should remind him," she shrugged, lowering her gaze back to her beloved.

As Pandora began to look at Subaru adoringly, Beatrice just kept blankly staring ahead. Pandora affectionately caressed the back of Subaru's hand with her thumb and, knowing that Beatrice was still staring at her, began to proceed with her explanation.

"Just like any other Witch, or Archbishop, he will be susceptible to being physically harmed and killed. However, in terms of aging, he will not. While his mind will still learn, evolve and develop, his body will remain the same. It is a process I cannot properly explain, nor is it something I properly understand, despite being a victim of such a process myself."

Beatrice's body and mind froze. She didn't even begin to wonder about the logistics of everything, or even question the absolute legitimacy of such claims, instead letting herself accept the statements without a doubt. She knew that Pandora was telling the truth. What reason would she have to lie?

As Pandora kept her eyes on Subaru, droplets entered her vision. Some had even landed on his forehead, making the former Witch once again, reluctantly, pick her head up. The Great Spirit was crying, sniffing as she looked down at her contractor's sleeping face. "Are you alright?" Pandora asked, despite not really wanting to.

Beatrice didn't even bother to wipe her own tears, instead deciding to clean Subaru's forehead of the droplets it received. In response to Pandora's question, she started to give small nods that soon evolved into larger, more emotional ones. "Yes- Yes, Betty is fine, I suppose," she uttered in a shaky voice, sniffing as she let more of her tears loose. "I'm just... so happy."

Pandora could only awkwardly nod in response, once more pointing her gaze back to her beloved. The only sounds around them were the wind, the trees that it moved, and Beatrice's soft cries.

After a few moments of this, the Great Spirit regained some of her composure. She wiped the tears away, her cries easing as her face adopted a small smile, "This isn't so bad, I suppose."

Pandora hummed in agreement, her eyes still glued to Subaru's sleeping expression while she nodded, "It is peaceful." Beatrice nodded too, agreeing. She didn't respond at

all, something that Pandora wordlessly appreciated, the both of them choosing to let the peace last in silence.

Meanwhile, Subaru opened his eyes within the same abyssal void he had previously found himself in. He gathered his bearings, quicker this time, looking around himself and recognizing two figures slightly further away.

As he got closer, he heard more of their dialogue, "Now, I will ask you again. I implore you don't disappoint me this time. Why would you *ever* think of conspiring with that poor excuse of a human? How. Dare. You." The white-haired man jabbed his finger into the other's chest multiple times to exude his point.

The other figure, the one with green hair, backpedaled in response to the other's oppression. However, despite physically cowering back, he held a confident front, "I have no obligation to even answer you."

The white-haired man's face became visibly angry. He growled, using his hand to grab the other man's collar and lifting him into the air, "Always so disrespectful! I asked you a question, so you should answer! I'm going to have to-"

"Hey! Regulus Corny-us!" A voice hollered from behind him.

Regulus, upon hearing this, turned his head around in an instant to meet wherever dare disgrace his name, "What did you say? How dare you disgrace me, Regulus Corneas! Do you know who I am? I am an Archbishop of the Witch's Cult, representing Greed! I have no flaws, for I am perfect! Now, who dares say this to me?!"

Subaru sighed as he stepped forth, both at the absurdity of Regulus' rant and in disappointment at his own joke. He gave his head a good shake to put himself in the game, exerting a sense of confidence as he declared, "It was I, Natsuki Subaru, that disgrace your name so!"

Petelgeuse looked over Regulus' shoulder, his expression containing that of admiration and hope. Regulus himself, however, was unamused, "Huh?! You again?! Did I not say that I didn't wish to see your face here again? You disrespect my rights by showing your face here again!" Regulus, in his anger, threw his arm holding Geuse to the side. This caused the spirit to fly out of his grip, landing some distance away from him. Regulus stomped forward a step, angrily, "Not only that, but you also insult me?! I may not understand the meaning of your insult, but it was a violation of my rights! Now-"

By now Subaru had tuned the lunatic out, closing his eyes so he could properly contemplate his plan. Regulus seemed to be able to use his Authority, which made him a very devastating opponent to face. However, when Subaru thought back to his previous bout with the man, he distinctly remembered a moment in which he was able to trip him.

Normally, that should have been impossible. Regulus' Authority was typically active at all times, which prevented him from being physically harmed or even touched. A permanent invincibility. Now, it seemed as though he was at a disadvantage. Regulus' Lion's Heart wasn't being supported, Subaru concluded. This meant that it was limited, having been put back onto its mere five second time limit. This was why Subaru was able to momentarily affect him at times.

This also meant that Subaru's interaction with Regulus before had been a direct result of the Archbishop activating and deactivating the ability consciously. So, Regulus knows of his limitations and is now optimizing his ability output. Smart, but frustrating. No matter, Subaru would just have to overwhelm him.

That being said, Regulus was also a lot weaker without that added aspect. Not only was his Lion's Heart limited, but so were his other abilities. He had no resources to use, no tools, only himself and what 'ground' he had in this unknown space they all currently occupied. That made things better, but it didn't exactly make things easy.

One may ask, how would Subaru be able to combat Regulus who, even with his limited Authority, could still best almost anyone in a quick fight? Well, while Regulus may have his own Authority, Subaru had one too.

Subaru kept his eyes closed, relaxing himself and steadying his mind. He delved deep within himself, searching for the ugly, rough, conniving power that had been bestowed upon him. He never found it. Rather, he found something much more pleasant, smooth and welcoming. It was like a hand, one that reached out for him to grab. A Helping Hand.

Without hesitation he clasped with his own hand, almost immediately feeling it suddenly surge within him. Comparing it to how it used to be — that being a bundled, uncomfortable knot at the center of his stomach — he now felt it smoothly coursing throughout his entire body, as if it were running through his very veins.

Subaru let his mind refocus, opening his eyes and looking sharply at the man before him. The Archbishop was standing there, somewhat menacingly, while his face rapidly contorted in angry expressions. Subaru let himself listen to the man's words, "-noring me?! You show up here, after I explicitly said I didn't want to see your face again, then insult me, now you're ignoring me?! Who do you think you a-"

The white-haired lunatic was cut off, having been forcefully grabbed by one of his legs, yanked forward and was now being violently thrown around in the 'air'. He flew in many different directions, his own body being pulled by an unseen force, flailing himself a little as the movements only became more sporadic. Then, in one final move, he was lifted high into the 'air' and slammed heavily onto the 'ground'.

Once Regulus made contact, Subaru smirked to himself. His eyes wandered over to Petelgeuse, who was off to the side regaining his composure. The look on the spirit's face was that of shock and amazement, yet also pride. Geuse felt proud not only because of Subaru's sudden handle over the Authority of Sloth, but also because he had used that exact same move against Regulus over a hundred years ago. The spirit ended up smiling in satisfaction, nodding at Subaru to show his respect.

Subaru nodded back, directing his eyes back to Regulus momentarily after. The man was getting back up, unharmed, "Now you listen here. I don't know who told you that it was okay to assault people while they're talking, but that is a viol-"

Once again, he was interrupted by something slamming into his chest at a high speed. He recoiled and gasped at the initial impact, only able to properly brace himself before he hit the 'ground' again. Once made contact with it again, he began sliding across it on his back until he stopped soon after. He quickly began to pick himself up again, albeit a bit shakily this time.

The Archbishop growled, letting out an audible tick of annoyance, "Fine, then. I despise fighting but, if you won't respect my rights, then I see that I have no choice."

He rushed forward, Subaru's eyes widening as Regulus seemingly teleported in front of him. Subaru barely ducked an arm swipe from Regulus, having aimed for his neck. Subaru's eyes narrowed, focusing and sending forth a counterattack.

Regulus didn't even feel the powerful uppercut that was delivered to him, courtesy of an invisible hand. Although it made his head recoil upward, the Archbishop immediately lowered it again to nastily glare at Subaru, snarling all the while.

He moved to grab the boy again, but Subaru pushed himself back with unusual force. Regulus looked both confused and immensely irritated as Subaru skidded to a halt. He was being cheeky and confident, something which Regulus didn't like one bit.

He moved to try and rush Subaru again, but he felt something grab him by the waist. Instinctively he looked down, only for his face to adopt an expression of surprise. A dark figure, in the shape of a hand, was wrapped around him. When he tried to follow it to the source, his eyes couldn't find a trail to follow. The hands were masked, hidden by

the dark void around them. But, Regulus just knew that the disrespectful boy was the source of this.

However, he hadn't much time to register any of his other thoughts, the hand around his waist squeezed and picked him up, throwing him high up into the 'air'. Subaru watched from below, plenty satisfied with his work so far. It would be a lie to say that he didn't enjoy knocking Regulus around.

As Regulus came hurtling down, Subaru's eyes followed. Once he made contact with the 'ground', Subaru wasted no time in trying to act once more. But, he quickly stopped himself. As predicted, Regulus had used his Authority to protect him from the fall, having somehow righted his posture enough to land on his backside. However Subaru had been too slow and too far away to act on the opportunity, unfortunately allowing the Archbishop to regain his composure and stand up once more. He would have to be closer and faster next time.

When the hand grabbed Regulus, Subaru too realized that his hands were actually visible; the Archbishop's reaction was all the proof he needed to confirm it. At first, he had thought that these hands acted like the predecessors Unseen Hand and Invisible Providence, but it seemed as though he were wrong. Despite this supposed disadvantage, he could still use it to his advantage.

When Regulus looked at the raven-haired boy, seeing his now teasing and confident expression, he only became more furious. But, just as he was about to rush forward, Subaru let himself confidently smirk before suddenly vanishing from the 'ground' up. It was as if something completely blanketed over him, starting and coming up from his feet.

The Archbishop immediately became wary and confused, looking all around him for any possible sign of the boy. He took steps back, to the side, and generally all around. The only thing he saw, other than himself, was Petelgeuse; the man was watching, amused, as Subaru and the Archbishop fought, which didn't help calm Regulus' anger.

That was when he heard a whistle. It was a mocking whistle, one that made Regulus seethe into his teeth. But, it wasn't coming from anywhere around him; no, it was coming from above him. When the Archbishop propped his head upward, he saw Subaru's beaming smile before something came crashing down onto his face.

The force pushed Regulus back onto the 'ground', having only just narrowly defended himself against the attack. The Archbishop, at this point, was getting sick and tired of being thrown around and knocked down. Subaru counted on that, he himself now being close enough to attack more ferociously. He dropped himself to the 'ground', with two hands helping him land properly, as he began to count the seconds in his head.

One.

Despite having been protected from some of the impact he was still a bit disoriented, something in which Subaru would act upon immediately. Multiple hands began absolutely bombarding Regulus, all while he still lay on his backside, forcing him to keep Lion's Heart active.

Two.

Regulus grunted in frustration, swiping his hand in front of him horizontally to eliminate all of the assaulting hands in one fell swoop. After doing so, he quickly stood up and began his fast approach. Subaru could visibly see the pure, unbridled rage radiating off of him.

Three.

But Subaru wasn't going to just let him gain ground so easily. No, Subaru sent hand-after-hand at Regulus, who repeatedly and consecutively destroyed them as he got

closer and closer. The boy narrowed his eyes, not out of contentment or aggravation but out of anticipation.

Four.

Regulus finally reached him, and he was very unwilling to make the same mistake as the last time. This time he went for a lunge instead of a grab, using his forward momentum to help his chances at hitting Subaru head-on. Subaru hadn't expected such a brash move and, in an attempt to shield himself, formed two hands in front of him to try and block the attack.

They failed, with Regulus smashing right through them and effectively tackling the boy to the ground. Subaru hit the 'ground' hard, all with enough force to disorient and somehow knock the wind out of him. Regulus used one hand to hold him down, reeling the other back with an enclosed fist.

Five.

Time was up. Regulus felt the side effects immediately, taking his hands off of Subaru and stumbling his way off of him. Both hands ended up clutching at his heart, undoubtedly feeling an intense amount of pain accompanied with an extreme fear of death. Subaru didn't know how that logically worked here, but he didn't stop to think about it. Narrowing his eyes, he capitalized on the opportunity to pin Regulus to the 'ground' for good this time using his Helping Hands.

Subaru picked himself up, albeit a tad shakily, and looked down at Regulus with a hard, stern expression, "Now listen up. I don't know if you were too busy having your head up your own ass to notice, but I'm done being scared," Subaru kept narrowed his eyes at the downed Archbishop, stating his resolve full-force; he glared back. "I'm going to show everyone how much I love them. My friends, Beako, Dora, and, when they're born, my children too. I'm not going to take and not give back anymore. They don't deserve that. You got that?"

Regulus' posture suddenly changed. Subaru couldn't explain it, but it was almost as if the Archbishop... relaxed. Subaru relented keeping him pinned, removing the hands that were keeping him in place. The white-haired man only lay there, his gaze having shifted upward to look into nothingness. Subaru could feel the hostile aura dissipate, leaving something much calmer in its stead.

Subaru turned his back to the man, reluctantly. Petelgeuse was approaching from his previous spot, a small smile on his face, "I must commend you, Subaru-sama. For not only have you mastered Sloth, but now Greed."

He sighed in return, "I'm never going to get used to this 'sama' talk from you, am I..." he trailed off, lowering his head dramatically whilst Geuse chuckled amusingly. Subaru picked up his head, "What do I do now?"

At the question, Geuse motioned his head behind the raven-haired boy, "See for yourself."

At that, Subaru found himself turning around. When he did, he jumped and had to take a step back out of pure shock. The sight wasn't what he had expected. He thought that, upon turning around, he'd just see the body of Regulus where it had been only seconds ago, but he was wrong. Alternatively, in its place, stood a little boy that looked up at him with curious eyes.

Subaru looked over at Geuse, clearly confused and unsure of what to do. The spirit only kept his smile, with a hint of teasing ever so embedded into it, only merely nodding forward in reference to the little boy. Subaru turned his head back to him, leveling himself and straightening his back, but still on guard.

The little boy, who sported Regulus' look, tilted his head at him, "Are you new around here, Mister?"

Subaru shifted his eyes nervously, "I, uh- I guess I am." He nodded to the little boy's question, steadying his eyes to properly look down at him.

It was as if the little boy's eyes lit up. He leant forward excitedly, excited fists shaking under his chin, standing on his toes as he examined Subaru from as many angles as possible, "Woah! So, you're really him! I've heard so~ much about you! My name is Regulus, nice to meet you!"

Subaru was even more confused, "Wait, who-"

"Oh, yeah! I've got something for you!" The kid started fumbling around with one of his pockets, as if he were digging for something. "Ah, here we go," he mumbled as he took something out, holding it out in both hands to present it to Subaru. "Here! This is yours, I've been keeping it for years!"

The object the kid held out was a small, black box with symbols he didn't recognize present on most sides of it. Though, other than that, it was mostly blank with no clear indication of what it was supposed to contain or be. Subaru looked between the box and the kid, a little unsure and quite reluctant to take it, "Are you sure this is mine? Isn't this yours? You said you've been keeping it for years, I'd hate to take it away."

"Pssh," the kid sounded, obviously brushing off Subaru's concerns. He even raised his hand, waving it around from side to side as if he were *literally* brushing them off, "I said that this is for *you*, silly. Plus, I don't need it anymore! It would be greedy of me to try and keep it. So, why can't I just give it to someone who really does need it? I think I should be allowed to do that! Now take it, come on! My arms are gonna get tired!"

After that, Subaru did take the box. It would've been a lie to say that Subaru hadn't been uneasy during the kid's rant, having been reminded of Regulus' old behavior. Shaking his head, he put his attention on the box that now rested in his hands. It felt light and it even felt natural to him, in some sense he couldn't understand. Holding this box just felt right, for some reason. He could only look at it with a contemplative face.

"Do not worry, Subaru-sama," a voice stated, prompting Subaru to look up from the box. Petelgeuse was walking over, positioning himself behind the kid and putting his hands protectively onto the little boy's shoulders. He still gave Subaru his nice, kind smile, "I will look after him here. You won't have anything to worry about."

"Just open my gift when you're ready, Mister Subaru-sama!" The kid exclaimed, earning a heartily laugh from Geuse and a sigh from Subaru. "I'm sure you're going to love it! Oh, and it will de~finately help you a little with your problem!"

When the kid winked, Subaru froze and his face gradually darkened until it was a very deep shade of red. The kid noticed, tilting his head, "Uhm... Mister Subaru-sama, are you okay?"

Petelgeuse let himself chuckle a bit again. Seeing Subaru's reaction, he thought it would be best to explain some things before he got the wrong idea, "He just means your problem with physical contact. You'll see. Like I said, you do not have to worry about anything here. I'll take care of him. But, as for you, you have someone else to take care of."

This time it was Geuse's turn to wink, catching Subaru off-guard. He looked at the spirit with surprised eyes, "Wait, so, you know. And you're-"

"Okay with it? Yes, I am. In fact, I think it's quite remarkable," Petelgeuse closed his eyes, thinking to himself as he commented. After a quick moment of thought, he opened them again and looked at Subaru supportively, "You've changed that girl's very being. Her own heart, even. It's outstanding and unheard of, but that isn't bad. She really does love and care for you and, as long as that remains true, then there is no issue." Once he finished, he awkwardly coughed into his own fist, "Now, you need to go take care of her."

Subaru only blinked at him for a couple of seconds, before returning Geuse's long-lasting smile with his own. With a sincere voice, he said, "Thanks, Geuse, for supporting me."

The spirit only nodded, "You are quite welcome, Subaru-sama. I am happy to help in any way I can. Now, I do believe you should be going? You have people you need to see." Subaru laughed a little, noticing how frequently Geuse was trying to get him to leave.

The kid, realizing that it was time for Subaru to go, raised his hand into the air to wave, "Bye~ Mister Subaru-sama! Come back and visit soon!"

"Oh, you bet I will. Geuse over there is gonna be helping me with my relationship problems. Take care of him, Regulus."

"Wait, what-" As Petelgeuse's eyes widened and the kid laughed at his expense, Subaru turned his attention back to the box in his hand. He looked at it curiously, directing his free hand to the side of it and grabbing hold. Then in one motion he opened it, revealing a bright light that made him instinctively close his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, imagine his surprise when he saw two sets of eyeballs eagerly staring down at him. It made him jump a little, while the two sets of eyeballs — revealed to be both Pandora and Beatrice — immediately crushed him in their own hugs.

Of course, without hesitation, he hugged them back. Though, something wasn't right. Pandora was smiling at him happily and supportively, but Beatrice was different. The Great Spirit was crying, hugging him as tight as she could whilst burying her head into his chest. She screamed his name as many times as she could.

His expression became one of worry as he looked down at her, putting a hand on her head, "Beako, what's wrong? Why are you crying? If anyone's been bullying you, you know that you can tell me." He gave Pandora a half-hearted stink eye, which made her lightly laugh.

Beatrice quickly pulled her head out of his chest, letting him get a good look at the eyepatch over her right eye as well as her tear-stained cheeks. Her expression wasn't that of a pout or frown, like he thought it would be, but instead it was a beaming smile. She wasn't sad; no, she was happy. Extremely happy, even. She didn't even have to tell him why, because just seeing that expression made him smile too. If she was happy, then he was also happy.

He rubbed her head a little with one of his hands, her expression changing to that of satisfaction as he did so. For a second, he could have sworn that he'd even heard her purr. The Great Spirit ended up closing her eyes, letting herself enjoy the affection that her contractor bestowed upon her.

It wasn't long before the other girl at his side began pulling on his other arm, however. When he turned to look at her, all whilst still petting his Beako, she was *pouting*. Subaru snorted in amusement, "Wow, you're jealous."

Pandora blinked, flinching back nervously and unconsciously drifting her gaze away from him. "Not jealous," she mumbled, playing with some strands of her own hair.

"Pfft, you're actually jealous, I can't believe that," he laughed at her, making her pout more. Just looking at that face of hers, those cute expressions, and her new sweet personality combined with that made him swoon. She was just so cute to him, how could he not?

"Why did you stop patting Betty, I wonder? I know we will have countless centuries for you to dote on Betty, but that doesn't mean you should stop now, in fact!"

Subaru must've really started ogling at Pandora, because he hadn't even realized that he had stopped giving Beatrice headpats until she'd actually said something. Needless to say, he resumed immediately.

As for her comment, Subaru only gave Pandora a questioning look, in which she gave him one that basically said, "I will tell you later."

After that, the three of them proceeded to share the moment together. Both girls ended up, very reluctantly, sharing Subaru's affection, something he was all too glad to give out. Said affection ranged from headpats, hugs and even kisses — though, to keep things fair, nobody got anything more than a kiss on the forehead. Once they all had their fill, which they quite frankly didn't, and the day began to pass, they finally found themselves willing to move.

As they stood up, the pair's hands joining together once more, Subaru had an idea. A mental intuition, as he wanted to call it. So, he called out, "Dora, is it okay if we... well, try something really quick?"

They stopped walking, Pandora turning around to face him curiously, yet also a bit frighteningly. She nodded, although a bit scared, "Of course, Bar. But... you are not going to step on me again, are you?"

As Beatrice snapped her head to the two of them, wanting to know what Pandora was talking about, Subaru's face burned red, "N-No! I'm not going to do that! It's something else, this time!"

Pandora sighed, somewhat relieved. She wouldn't have exactly *minded* it, had that been what he wanted to do, though. She shook her head, snapping out of those thoughts as Subaru asked if she was ready. When she nodded, confirming that she was, he began.

He took a deep breath, taking some steps back from her which extended their arms out a bit. Their conjoined hands were held out in the middle, directly in view for the both of them to see. Beatrice eyed them with a questioning expression, watching with a hint of unease and fear at what Subaru was planning to do. She was no doubt remembering the nightmare she had gone through, in which she had to deal with them both being separated from one another after their initial release.

Subaru took a deep breath, remembering what the kid version of Regulus told him before. Pandora was trusting him and he really didn't want to let her down, so he really hoped that this would work. "Brace yourself if this doesn't work, Dora," he suddenly suggested, probably making her even more uneasy. 'Way to go, Subaru. Good job,' were some of his mental berations.

With that, he began to release his grip on her hand. He whispered, "Cor Leonis: Third Shift," under his breath just as their hands separated. Both of them were tempted to reconnect with the other immediately, but there was nothing. No panicking, no breakdowns, no fear... just calm.

After a few moments passed with nothing changing, they both looked at their hands, almost instinctively, still feeling as though nothing was wrong. It was an odd feeling; it was as though they were separated, yet they still felt as if they were with one another. Neither of them quite knew how to describe it, but couldn't help but wonder if they had truly just fixed their issue.

"Are you crazy, I wonder?!" Beatrice exclaimed, clearly both worried and upset. "You could have hurt yourself! Or worse! What if that failed?! Morons! Idiots!"

Suddenly, Beatrice reeled her leg back and sent it forth with as much force as she could muster. She aimed her foot right for Subaru's own leg, intending to let out a bit of her frustration on him. It wasn't like he didn't deserve it a little, either, for scaring her for so long. Needless to say, he felt the hit, "Ow!"

"Ouch!"

Both Subaru and Pandora both ended up lifting up their legs, covering them in the *exact* same spot— specifically the one Beatrice had hit. They looked at each other funnily, blinking unexpectedly. They'd both realized: they'd felt the same pain, in the same spot. Beatrice looked between the two incredulously, mouth slightly agape in her own surprise.

"Well, this is... something," Subaru tried to joke, awkwardly laughing as he scratched the back of his head.

Pandora went along with it, lightly laughing at his petty attempt to alleviate the atmosphere, "It is certainly better than our previous... method."

Beatrice looked between them with suspicious eyes, "What other method?"

Subaru seemed a bit hesitant to answer, averting his gaze away from his Great Spirit a little, but Pandora looked directly at her and spoke, "We were practicing staying separated by separating for as long as possible."

Beatrice glared at them, but more so Subaru, "You were *what*? What did I just say, I suppose! Do you two have no idea how mental anxiety works?! It is *not* something you just can force to go away!"

Beatrice kicked Subaru's leg a few times to drive her point home, yelling about how idiotic they were being, which effectively hurt them both, and, to Beatrice, that was a win-win. When she was done, Subaru nervously laughed at the situation, looking to Beatrice with a pathetic-looking face, "Sorry, Beako, I should've-"

"Yes, you should've spoken to me before you did something so illogically stupid. What you and her have can only be undone with *time*; you can't force it to go away! Your new... method seems like it will only be a temporary solution too, so don't go thinking that you've solved the problem." With that, she narrowed her eyes at him, "Now stop looking at Betty with that pathetic face and promise that you'll do better in the future, I suppose," she crossed her arms, looking away from him with a huff.

Subaru stared at her for a moment, before smiling, "Alright, Beako, I promise I won't do something like that again. Before I try anything, I'll come talk to you, okay?"

The Great Spirit hummed to herself as if she were thinking about how she should to respond to him, "I suppose that was adequate enough of an apology." With that, she turned her head back over to Subaru, "Betty expects you to keep your promise, in fact."

Subaru nodded, "I will, Beako. Don't worry."

Beatrice should have expected that Subaru would pick her up by the arms and twirl her around in the air. Of course, he laughed and she screamed for him to put him down whilst flailing her arms every which way. Yet, her demands to him were anything but genuine. In fact, the Great Spirit found great enjoyment in his act. She truly did miss this a lot.

When he was done, he gently set her back down on the ground. She pouted and turned her backside to him, feigning her own stubbornness. He affectionately ruffled her hair a bit whilst turning to look at Pandora, who was looking at them with another blank expression. Instead of letting himself get too concerned or scared by it, he addressed her directly, "Dora, do you feel left out? If so, I've still got a lot left for you, don't worry!"

Those words took her out of the trance she was in, shaking her head and quickly realigning her gaze on him, "Ah, well... maybe I was a little."

Subaru was a little surprised by her shy admission, but smiled at her nonetheless. Before he could do anything, however, Beatrice spoke up, "I apologize for interrupting,

but I must be going, in fact."

That made Subaru look back down at her, confused and worried, "What do you mean, Beako? Where do you have to go?"

She sadly looked up at him. He could tell that she really didn't want to go, just by the expression that was being conveyed to him, "There is something I need to find in Elior Forest, I suppose. Once I find it, I will be back. It should not take long."

Subaru wanted to sigh as he contemplated his own feelings on the matter. Despite how much he wanted her to stay, or how much he wanted to help her, she would probably vigorously deny both. Knowing that, all he could do was give her his best wishes, "Alright, I understand. Just... be careful, okay? Come back soon."

"Hmph. As if you should be saying that, when you were the one that left Betty for so long, in fact!" She puffed her cheeks at him and, while her words did sting a bit, he took them more as a, 'Don't worry, I'll be okay and come back before you know it.'

In the end, the two hugged. They held one another tight, as if it would be their last time seeing each other. When they separated, Subaru wished her farewell once more and went to Pandora's side. The former Witch smiled at him as he stood next to her, something he was happy to see. Before Beatrice left, she made it very clear that she *did not* want them doing any funny business while she was gone. The pair blushed, though it was more prominent on Subaru. It even looked more as if Pandora somewhat enjoyed the memory of their actions, as opposed to being embarrassed.

Subaru waved, as did Beatrice, before the Great Spirit vanished using some type of spell he'd never seen before. Subaru slightly tilted his head, amazed, "That's... new." He looked over at Pandora, who also looked at him, "Did you know that she could do that?" The former Witch shook her head, "Huh... Well, wild day, I guess."

They turned to face one another more directly. Pandora had quite a few questions, most of which she was going to be asking, "Baru, would you like to explain everything that has happened?"

With the face he made, it seemed as though he'd just realized that he should've explained things to her sooner. Pandora didn't know whether she should adore him, or be disappointed, as he gathered his words together, "Oh, yeah. I probably should. I'm sure you remember when you told me to focus within myself and all that, right? Well, I did that, then I appeared in a place that looked *awfully* like the seal we used to be in. And, in there, I met with the representations of the Witch Sin Factors. One of them was Betelgeuse, he's really nice. Then there was Regulus, he wasn't that nice and even beat me up the first time. He was *really* adamant that he didn't like me, too."

Pandora, as if it were an instinct, looked at him with worry. She looked like she was about to bombard him with more questions, but Subaru held up his hand to stop her, "Now, I know what you're thinking, but it was fine. Sure I felt every single thing he did to me, and it hurt like hell, but I sure as hell bounced back! Well, he slammed my face into the ground and forced me back out here... but, you know, still bounced back afterwards!"

She eyed him skeptically at first, but it quickly shifted into something more... murderous. It wasn't directed at him, he knew that, but he pitied the poor fool that earned Pandora's ire. Subaru had to quickly keep talking as to not fuel that look of hers, "Remember when I said that I had someone to go beat up before I went back under? Yeah, that's who I was going to go beat up. I did, by the way. I even made... a really bad joke. But, yeah, I beat him so bad that he turned into a child! Still don't really know how that happened, but I guess that was the 'purification form' thing Geuse was talking about."

He shrugged nonchalantly at his own words while Pandora actually seemed to calm down, all in favor of studying his explanation more thoroughly. All Pandora could think at first was, despite how much she loved him, the fact that Subaru *did not* do a good

job of explaining things, at all, was undeniable. Though by piecing together the fragments she had, things somehow started to make a little more sense.

"To clarify, you went into this... area, within yourself, that permitted you to talk to the Witch Factors, or, rather, their representations, correct?" She received a nod in response. She kept going, "You interacted with Betelgeuse?"

He gave her another nod, "Pretty much. When I first got there he was actually normal, though. He actually said that I had already conquered Sloth, when I met him."

That was intriguing, but she chose to continue with her recap for now, "Then, after that, you met the Greed representation, which took the form of Bishop Corneas. It did not like you and kicked you out, yes?" Another nod. She continued, "Is this one of the motivations for as to why we had our talk?"

He nodded once more, "Yeah. I was going to talk to you about it anyway, but... it just felt right at that moment. I didn't want to leave it hanging any longer, and I'm glad that I didn't."

She herself nodded in response, understanding his point of view. Despite that, she had no doubt that the Greed representation had said something to him which prompted it to happen. Though, the fact that Subaru had been hurt thoroughly enraged her. She did her best to digress from that thought, "Then, after getting closure from our talk, you went back in and conquered the sin?"

Subaru proudly puffed out his chest, "Pretty much! Sorry again for not talking to you about it sooner. I felt really motivated at that moment and wanted to act on it."

Pandora shook her head, moderately amused, smiling all the while, "You do not need to apologize. I am happy for you, Baru. Nevertheless, I do wish you could have explained this... situation better." That made him laugh, something in which she joined in on; though, her laughs were more like light giggles. When they were done, she looked at him expectantly, "I believe we should talk more about the abilities you've gained, yes?"

Subaru's face lit up, "Right! I need to show you." After saying those words, Subaru promptly backed away from her. She didn't necessarily want him to be so far away from him — even though it wasn't really that far at all — but she relented so he could properly demonstrate the abilities he wanted to show.

She saw him close his eyes, watching curiously as he took one deep breath. He could feel his Authority within him, all throughout his body, as if it were still coursing through his veins. When he opened his eyes, to her surprise, two dark, visible hands began extruding from his stomach. Her eyes momentarily widened before they settled on him with a proud gaze.

"I call it the 'Helping Hand'," he told her, extending the hands out further for her to take a better look at. "I don't think they're much stronger than my own arms, though. But, watch this," he recalled the two hands, letting them re-enter his stomach. Once they did, he called upon three more hands, one extending out from above each foot while another came out of his backside. "I can have them come out from anywhere, not just my stomach. It was really *handy* when I fought Regulus."

Pandora shook her head at his terrible joke, but didn't let it stop her from marveling at his accomplishment, "This is amazing, Baru. I knew you could do it!" She excitedly exclaimed, proudly. Though, she was still curious, "What is your summoning limit?"

He hummed thoughtfully, retracting the hands again, "I think five." After he answered, he let four hands come out of his backside. Each of them anchoring themselves to the ground while he called upon a fifth from his stomach area. He hummed again, "Yeah, I can't summon anymore than this."

"I see," Pandora mumbled, putting a hand to her chin as she thought. "I suppose we will just have to work on that. With some time and practice, I am sure you will be able to summon more."

Subaru smiled, "Yeah, I think so too. But they're not exactly limiting per say, either. I can think of a lot of different ways to use these. For example..." he trailed off, rather letting his actions speak in place of his words. He used the hands that were anchored to the ground — the ones extruding from his backside — to push him high into the air. At some point, they reached their stretching limit and couldn't extend any further; but, even so, they were still able to lift him pretty high up.

Pandora continued to marvel at them, mumbling to herself, "That range is not bad at all." She looked up to him, smiling while she called out, "This can be very useful, Baru!"

He lowered himself down, calling back all of his hands once he touched the ground. He smiled back at her, still very proud of himself, "Yup! It'll be great for getting over or around certain terrain, or even scaling high mountains and cliffs."

Pandora nodded vigorously, agreeing with his statement, all while thinking his proud expressions and poses were cute, "What of your other abilities? The ones representing Greed; your Cor Leonis."

The smile on Subaru's face faltered to that of more of a neutral, thoughtful look. He crossed his arms, contemplating the question as well, "To be honest, I don't know. The only reason I knew of, well, this one," he gestured to the both of them, clearly referencing the newly acquired ability he'd used which allowed them to properly separate, "was because of some mental intuition I had. I don't really know if there's more than that, or if my other Cor Leonis Shifts have changed."

Pandora nodded in understanding. Another thing occurred to her, "I should mention that, during your goodbye with Beatrice, I could feel everything that you could. Every touch, hug, pat on her head and even the cloth of her clothes."

At that, he nervously laughed, "Yeah, I kinda figured that you could because, well, I should also say that I can... feel everything from you, too."

Pandora tilted her head to the side a little, clearly perplexed, "What do you mean, Baru?"

His eyes motioned down then back up to her face multiple times, "You're- uh... not wearing any shoes, so... every time you step on something, I can feel it."

Oh. Well, she supposed that did make sense, didn't it? She looked down at her feet, wiggling her toes within the grass a little. It tickled a bit, something which he no doubt felt but didn't give a reaction to, much to her disappointment. "S-Say, how come you don't wear shoes, anyway? Don't all the rocks and dirt bother you?"

She looked back up at him, then back down at her feet. She lifted up one of her legs, grabbing it by the ankle to show him her heel, which was seemingly completely clean. "My Authority essentially prevents dirt and other imperfections from sticking to my body. Though it has its limits; for example, it does not repel certain odors," his face changed at the reminder. "As for it bothering me... it never really did," she trailed off a bit, averting her gaze uncomfortably to the side. She really didn't want to go into more detail about that part, again.

He seemed to understand her explanation in more ways than one, so she lowered her leg and stood properly once more. The two had fallen into silence but, as Pandora snapped out of her stupor and looked at his face, it seemed to her as though he was considering experimenting with his new or unfound abilities.

She walked over to him, taking his hand in hers, "It is getting late. We wasted a lot of time this morning and, with everything else that occurred, the day flew by quite fast. It has been a long day, especially for you. Shall we rest?" She also now felt the need to

get shoes for herself and didn't want to be outside anymore without them, especially with this new ability of his potentially being a regular thing.

She gave him a sweet, loving look that just made him just want to immediately agree to her proposal. Unsurprisingly, he did just that, "I... guess you're right; we should rest. We'll have all day tomorrow to practice and stuff."

When he looked up, the sun was already going down. He let his impatience fade as he intertwined his fingers with hers, deactivating Cor Leonis: Third Shift whilst doing so. He felt there was no need to keep it activated; plus, he didn't know if it brought him any negative reproductions yet, so having it continuously active over a long period of time was probably not the smartest decision.

The two walked back to the mansion together, opening the doors and heading inside once they reached it. It felt odd to Subaru, at least at first. It felt emptier, less lively, especially with Beatrice not being around. Just the two of them alone together in the mansion... it was nice, but it was also just a little too quiet. It made him feel uneasy, remembering their eternal confinement together. Pandora was inclined to feel the same way.

When they made it back to their room, they found a handwritten note from Beatrice on the bed. Essentially, it just gave them instructions for how to make the special remedy she always made and where to find the ingredients. They made sure to keep the note aside for the next day. Neither of them wanted to die of dehydration or starvation, after all.

They soon found themselves climbing into the bed, not having even bothered to change their clothes. Conveniently, the bed had new sheets and pillows for them to use, too. The two got comfortable, cuddling into one another, but, even after doing so, neither of them could fall asleep right away.

Subaru felt unusually nervous and Pandora picked up on that, unwilling to even try falling asleep until she knew that he was okay. She picked her head up a little, looking at him and calling out to him in a hushed whisper, "Baru, are you alright?"

He looked back at her, his eyes giving away his true thoughts as he replied, "Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to relax, I think."

She knew he was lying to her, deciding to question him again, "Are you certain? Is it about the nightmare you had last night?"

He took in a deep breath, letting his gaze wander a bit, "It was just a nightmare, I swear. It was nothing to worry about."

He lied again. It made her upset, even leading her to frown a little, but she didn't say anything else back. She didn't want to force him to talk about something he clearly didn't want to. He could come to her when he felt ready, but if it became a more prominent problem then she'd certainly bring it up again.

In the end, she forced herself to let it go for now. Pandora leant over to give him a quick peck on the lips before burying her head into the crook of his neck, right next to the mark she'd given him that very morning. She closed her eyes, wrapping an arm over his chest while a small smile graced her face, "Goodnight, Baru. I love you."

At that moment Subaru felt content, as did she. He put his own arm around her back, holding her securely close, as he too closed his eyes and truly relaxed himself, "I love you too, Dora. Goodnight."

They both began drifting off in the comfort of each other's arms, letting themselves steadily be consumed into the void of sleep. That didn't mean they hadn't drifted off without worries, though. Pandora worried for her beloved, hoping he was okay. Subaru didn't want her to worry. It was why he lied before, and it was why he hoped that he wouldn't have another vision now.

***Chapter 8*: Rehash**

Let me just clear something up really quick.

Do you all remember, way back in chapter two, when I said that you can "choose what you want to consider canon"? Okay, well, that means that you literally choose what can be, or what can not be, considered canon. Let me put this into perspective.

I initially posted this with the intention of making it a clean one-shot, inspired by Flugel124's original one. Though, demand for more rose and I felt motivated to continue; but, I didn't want to create an unnecessary story for those of you who just liked the one-shot.

Essentially, I created a diversion in which this universe can go. The ending for chapter one was purposely ambiguous, and the text at the end being the exact same as my author's notes was no coincidence. You get to choose what happened after that moment. It can be this story, it could be a different awakening, or it could even be a reality in which they never escaped at all. It's all for you to decide; that was the intention from the start.

I hope that I conveyed that well enough.

I went back and added scene dividers into the last two chapters, to help space things out and make things look cleaner for you all. They are also in this chapter as well, as I am incorporating them more actively into the story.

Now with those things out of the way, let me apologize really quickly. The delay for this was way too long. This isn't even the full version of what I wanted to put out, too.

Essentially, the initial full chapter that I wanted to put out has... exceeded the amount of words that I want to use. In essence, I've written too much for one chapter. Last chapter was 20k and I don't want to surpass that. However, I didn't want to leave you with nothing for an extended amount of time.

Instead, I've decided to split it. This chapter isn't even half of what I've already written, and am still in the process of writing. I think it works pretty well on its own and serves as a good set up for what the next chapter will be. It gives me time to finish writing and release the next one within the next few days or so.

I'm not afraid to say that this isn't the most thrilling or exciting chapter yet, but considering what the next chapter will include... Well, I think you could use a little bit of tame before that.

In any case — this note has gone on for far too long — I hope this chapter is good enough to keep you interested for the next few days. Let me just say, the mist hyped and asked for chapter is very much on the horizon. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 8: Rehash

The morning came a little too fast for Subaru. It had been a bit rough; while he didn't have another vision, nightmare, or whatever it was, he was haunted by the stress and worry that his mind oh so graciously provided him. It kept him awake, as he became constantly burdened by his own torment. He held Pandora a bit tighter than he normally would have, but she reciprocated it without hesitation. Even in her sleep, she was still looking out for him.

That made him feel bad. The fact that Pandora was doing so much for him, yet he was doing little for her, weighed on his mind. Of course, he knew that wasn't true. He was aware that he kept her sane, in a way. Without him, she'd still likely be the Witch she

used to be. Still, though, despite that knowledge he felt as if he were doing too little. He wanted to make up for that, not only through his show of love but through his support. That was his resolve and he'd be sure to stick to it.

Either way, morning had come and the two were 'ready' to start their day. They were both a little unenthusiastic about waking up, but they pushed through and reluctantly rose from their slumberous state.

Surprisingly, everything that morning played out smoothly. The two got ready for the day, performing some rather mundane routine activities to do so. Afterward, the two took Beatrice's carefully written instructions to the kitchen, where they did their best to replicate the recipe. It wasn't as hard as either of them initially thought, with every ingredient being fairly easy to find and the directions Beatrice left being just as easy to follow.

In the end, they'd ended up with the correct concoction. Upon drinking it, the substance helped with any and all bodily deficiencies, essentially restoring them. It even allowed them to become a little more energized, despite the rough night they'd had. The rest of the day was, more or less, rather tame. Later on, Pandora and Subaru went outside to practice and train the Authorities better.

That was how the week itself played out. The same general routine repeating itself in a smooth, fluent cycle. Neither of them could complain, nor necessarily wanted to. It was nice and even peaceful. To them, it sorta felt like a taste of a private, married life, just without some of the other added aspects.

During this time, they kept things consistent in their routine. Wake up, get ready for the day, make Beatrice's remedy and train. Those were the four main things they did each day.

During training, Pandora did her best to guide and help him learn new and unique ways to use his Authorities. There were also the occasional visits with Geuse and Regulus, just for the extra help and support.

For the Authority of Sloth, or the Helping Hand, while Subaru was unable to overcome his limit of five hands, he was very much able to utilize them in many different ways.

For example, since the hands could emerge from any part of his body, he could cover a large amount of area. One instance of this was when he had all five hands extrude from the same horizontal line around his waist, like a pentagon. This allowed him to effectively use them to surround his body in both a sudden offensive and defensive manner.

With that, they also tested the hand's strength and general durability. Subaru's initial analysis hadn't been completely inaccurate; each hand was no more than a little above his ordinary strength and could take a bit of a beating. It wasn't much, but, to Subaru, it was still a vast improvement from his old Invisible Providence. Additionally, their reach, while unimproved, remained impressive.

Other than that, they found that the hands had one hell of a grip. This meant that each of the hands on their own were capable of applying an incredibly tight hold onto any surface or object without the risk of letting go, unless they were destroyed or called back to him.

Subaru also found himself in complete control of how tight or loose the hands could hold onto something. That, combined with the reach, was exceptionally useful for scaling certain terrain, or even just grabbing and moving large things around.

For Cor Leonis, things were a little bit different. The Authority of Greed worked differently than Sloth, with different effects and properties. Though, while they weren't able to practice with this one as much, they were still able to find some changes.

For starters, Subaru's very new Shift Three. It was useful, given he and Pandora's unique circumstances, but outside of that it didn't seem to serve much of a purpose. Pandora explicitly noted that the ability seemed to connect two individuals' souls together, allowing each person to feel and experience the same things.

The experiences were odd, more than anything else. Subaru and Pandora both preferred to stay in physical contact over using the ability, finding the aftereffects rather uncomfortable. Even the slightest of emotional and physical feelings would be conveyed to the other. Needless to say, it made using the bathroom infinitely more awkward for the both of them.

Both of them decided to only use Third Shift in unique circumstances, being if they needed to get changed or separate for long periods of time, for whatever reason, just to make things a little more convenient. If there was anything beyond Third Shift, Subaru was unable to discover it just yet.

Regarding First and Second Shift, their changes were minimal to none. They were particularly harder to test, since most of the conditions weren't exactly met. He had no burden to share nor any burden to take, and neither of them were really willing to injure themselves in order to better test things out.

With the week coming to pass and night falling upon them, the two decided to stay out a little later. Together they lay outside, backs pressed against the grass as their heads aimed up toward the sky. The stars above twinkled and shone above their gaze.

Neither of them talked. They didn't need to. The moment itself spoke for them. Their hands remained intertwined under the night sky, light smiles on their faces all the while.

Pandora blinked a few times, her gaze shifting into more of a daze as she became lost in her thoughts. After some time she came back, slightly tilting her head against the grass, "It is fascinating." Subaru didn't move his head, nor did he respond. He stayed silent, letting Pandora finish her speech, "There are so many stars, with so many possible worlds around each of them."

This time he hummed, agreeing with her. It certainly was fascinating, to say the least. They were both space fanatics, so it was a given that they'd be enthralled in the mysteries surrounding the stars.

"Your world is one of them, Baru," she stated matter-of-factly. "I do wish that I could see it."

His smile momentarily became bigger, before settling on its previous state, "I wish that I could take you there. I think it'd be fun to show you around, take you all over the place so you can experience everything my world has to offer."

"That does sound quite enjoyable," she commented. From her voice, he knew that she found the prospect exciting.

"Yeah, it really does. You could even meet my... meet my parents..."

Pandora noticed the tonal shift, his smile dropping with his mood, so she applied a light squeeze to his hand in the form of reassurance, "It is okay to miss them."

He was silent for a moment, sniffing once before he spoke again, "I know, I know. I just... I never appreciated them. Now I'm here, I don't know if I'll ever be able to go back, and they could be dead for all I know."

"Do not think like that," she squeezed his hand again, turning her head along the grass to face him. He was inclined to do the same, similarly turning his head and allowing their eyes to meet, "We will find a way, someday, I promise."

Subaru did nothing for a few seconds, only giving small nods once they'd passed, "Thanks, Dora." He smiled again, letting his appreciation show, "I'm really thankful for

this."

Deciding to lighten the mood a little, she let herself smile more cockily, "Thankful for what, I wonder? Is it me, perhaps?"

Subaru, realizing exactly what she was doing, hummed snarkily, "No, of course it's not you. I was referring to the general moment. I'm appreciating the moment."

"That does not make much sense," she laughed.

He let out a mock sigh, "Sure it does. I'm saying the stars are better than you. Aren't you jealous?"

"I believed that I was your star, no? That I 'lit up the darkness of the void', for you?"

His face reddened, eyes slightly averting themselves from her, "I never said that."

"I seem to recall that you did. A~ll whilst we were trapped together."

"Well..." his eyes fell back on her, "there's one that took your place as my favorite."

"Oh~? Which one?"

"Uh... Betelgeuse."

"Is that so?" her eyebrow playfully twitched once or twice. "Perhaps I should go ahead and speak with him about this."

"Uhm... he doesn't want to talk to you, I think he's busy babysitting right now."

"I insist."

Subaru sighed, "You won't give up until I admit it, will you?"

Pandora smiled wide, "Nope."

Subaru shook his head, "Okay, okay. You *are* my favorite star, the one that brightens both the literal void and the one that filled my heart."

"See, Baru? That was not so hard, was it?"

"Yes, actually, it was. I really have to get better at teasing you..."

Silence followed thereafter, the conversation left on a high note whilst the sounds of the night occupied their ears. It was relaxing, their eyes sinking into the other's. Almost instinctively, the two slowly drew their heads closer together in an intimate show of love, ready to gently press their lips against the other's.

Then their moment got interrupted.

A light hum, followed by a loud buzz, then another light hum sliced through the void of silence in the air. The two, curious and on guard, quickly sat themselves up and faced the noise, ready to defend themselves and each other if need be.

"Betty is... very tired... I suppose."

Before them was not some sudden threat, or mysterious figure, but the overly exhausted form of Subaru's Great Spirit. Subaru and Pandora both relaxed themselves, watching as Beatrice slowly wobbled toward them.

Subaru looked at her with concern, "Are you okay, Beako?"

She looked up, attempting to put on a more confident and sturdy face, "Betty has... never been better... in fact."

He slightly raised an eyebrow, "You sure about that? You look like you'll keel over and collapse at any moment."

She then tried to shake her head more than a plethora of times, but only managed to do it twice, "Nonsense. Betty feels... Betty feels..."

Subaru could only sigh at his spirit's stubbornness. He supposed that he had no right to complain though, since he'd been just as stubborn with a great many things in the past. He closed his eyes, wordlessly activating Cor Leonis: First Shift.

"Betty feels... invigorated, I suppose!" Her mood flipped, her back straightening and hands forming into clenched fists, which found their way to her waist. She stood epicly, or even heroically, under the moonlight, now. Suddenly, she began hopping and moving around almost erratically. "Betty feels strong and energized- Subaru?"

Ahead of her, Subaru had almost collapsed, only able to even remotely stand up with Pandora's support. He took deep breaths, very much feeling the burden he'd taken hold of, "Geez, Beako... what the hell were you even doing all this... all this time?"

"Hmph! Betty was doing important things. And I was completely fine, in fact! You didn't need to take my burden!"

Subaru only ignored her protests, continuing to hold the burden on his own. Pandora lowered her head a little, leveling hers to where his was so that she could properly look at him, "You should have warned me, Baru." She pouted, but it turned out to be more playful than anything. He did his best to cockily smile back, but had a hard time doing so. Seeing this, without hesitation, she added, "Share it with me."

After that comment, he looked at her strangely, "You sure?" Pandora quickly nodded. With her confirmation, he activated Cor Leonis: Second Shift and promptly divided the burden between the two of them equally.

They felt the effects immediately, both having to quickly adjust to the sudden changes they were feeling. For Pandora, she felt a lot heavier, more tired and definitely a lot more exhausted, but it wasn't totally unbearable. In Subaru's case, it was as if someone lifted an entire piano off of his back. It felt so relieving.

The two composed themselves rather fast, standing with the support of one another just to be safe. With that out of the way, Subaru looked at his contracted wonderingly, "Did you at least find what you were looking for?"

At the inquiry, Beatrice perked up, "Yes, in fact. Though it was no easy feat."

"Did you not rest?" Pandora then questioned, she herself curious as to why the spirit's burden was so severe.

Beatrice slightly flinched back. Her expression screamed guilt, "Well..."

At her trail off, Subaru perked up and pointed at her accusingly, "Why didn't you rest?! You need a break every once in a while, Beako! Not resting isn't healthy!"

"You're one to talk, I suppose!" she exclaimed back, pointing at him just as accusingly. Subaru sighed, realizing his hypocrisy and lowering his arm. Soon after she also lowered her arm as well, looking at her hands and beginning to move her fingers together individually, "You don't know how hard it is to even get comfortable there. So, so cold... so much snow..."

Subaru just put a hand to his face, letting out a deep, moderately exasperated, breath into it. Pandora, surprisingly, was the one that stepped up, "You can rest properly now, so do so. We will, as well."

Beatrice gave her a peculiar look, but didn't disagree. She crossed her arms, though, as if to contemplate the proposal, "Very well, Betty will indulge herself in a little rest, I suppose."

The Great Spirit had been the first one to start walking toward the mansion's front door, but her contractor and the former Witch weren't far behind. As they walked, the spirit wondered aloud, "I take it that you have suitably practiced during my time away?"

"As much as we could, yeah," Subaru easily responded.

Beatrice nodded, finally reaching the door. She held out her hand to open it, speaking at the same time, "Good. We should be prepared for-"

A sudden crash boomed, the door erupting off of its hinges and hitting the floor with a loud bang. Subaru and Beatrice instinctively flinched at the noise, while Pandora remained still and quietly watched as the door settled on the ground.

After a moment, the former Witch's gaze slid over to the Great Spirit, an amused smirk appearing on her face as she snarkily remarked, "Nice job."

Both contractor and spirit recomposed themselves, the latter glaring at the former Witch, "That was not my fault!"

"You insist upon that, yet you were the one to break the door."

"Why you-" Beatrice stopped herself, taking a deep breath before she got too heated. Despite what she wanted to think, this woman was only teasing her; there was no need to get so upset about it. She calmed down, looking at her hands with an unsure face, "Betty feels unusually energized and strong, I suppose."

Subaru's head snapped to her in less than a moment, blinking once or twice before he quickly came to a conclusion. "Wait, wait, wait," his interjection turned the girl's heads toward him, "was this a problem before you came back?" When Beatrice shook her head, he had all the confirmation he needed. His head turned to Pandora, "Cor Leonis."

Her eyes momentarily widened before settling again right away, "Ah, that is true. After you took her burden, she did describe herself as being 'invigorated'."

Beatrice began rapidly moving her head between the two of them, "What are you talking about, I wonder? Did you not know of this beforehand?!"

Subaru didn't even need to look at Beatrice to know that she was annoyed, having heard it plenty well through her voice. He just kept looking at Pandora tiredly, mumbling, "Takes the burdens and grants energy and strength..." he sighed, "I really hope that we can figure out a way to filter that, because if not... that's going to be really annoying."

Pandora smiled at him, "I am sure that we will. Now," she paused, the door immediately reappearing back on its hinges as if it'd never been broken in the first place, "let us get some rest."

Although the sudden show of her Authority surprised the contractor and spirit duo, they didn't outwardly show it. Pandora, seemingly in a rush to go to bed, began walking forward, lightly taking Subaru along with her. Beatrice followed after them shortly thereafter.

Soon enough everyone found themselves in bed, huddled together in their 'usual' position. Subaru and Pandora hugged one another, while Beatrice held on tightly to his back. It was surprisingly rather comfortable for all of them.

For Subaru, the past week had gone swiftly by without another vision. Its absence helped clear his conscience of the built up anxiety, allowing him to better fall asleep. It was one of the reasons why he was so comfortable going to bed, currently, other than Beatrice now being back.

However, that didn't stop an odd feeling of existential dread from creeping up his spine every time he woke up. Every. Single. Time.

He felt as though he was being watched, very scrutinizingly so. It unnerved him, scared him even, every time he awoke, not knowing who, what and where it was. Although when he thought about it, he knew what it was. He just wished that they'd stop.

When the next morning came, everyone all around felt at least a little bit better. Beatrice wasn't as fatigued, nor were Pandora and Subaru. However in Subaru's case, the morning still came a little too soon. He knew that he was being watched, but didn't let his internal feelings show.

After getting ready for the day, Beatrice turned to him, "Subaru, could you do Betty a favor and activate your Cor Leonis: Third Shift?"

He'd looked back at her, both confused and unsure, "Uh... why would you want me to do that, Beako?"

"I would like to talk to your lover for a few moments, privately," she wasted little to no time in responding, further making Subaru confused, and a little worried.

He slightly tilted his head in a questioning manner, "...Why?"

Beatrice only sighed, "It is rather important, I suppose. That is all."

Subaru blinked at her a few times, thinking to himself on what his Beako could possibly want to privately talk to Pandora about. Then, he'd come to some sort of conclusion, smiling a little, "Alright, just don't be too harsh."

Their hands separated, with Pandora taking her time to leave his side and follow Beatrice to the door. The Great Spirit commented, "Don't worry, Betty won't be, I suppose," before shutting the door and leaving Subaru in the room, alone.

Both Great Spirit and former Witch faced one another once more, both of them looking at the other expectantly. Pandora started, "What do you believe he thinks we'll be talking about?"

Beatrice glanced at the door, then brought her eyes back to Pandora, "If Betty were to guess, he probably thinks that I will be lecturing you about doing those rather unsavory deeds. Though, I really should, in fact."

After considering it, Pandora uttered a simple, "Ah." Silence followed for a short few seconds before Pandora began again, "As you said yesterday, you found what you were looking for?"

Beatrice nodded, reaching into a small pocket in her black dress in order to pull out a small, black box. "I have," she stated.

Pandora recognized the box immediately, "I see. Do you intend to repurpose this box to contain my Authority?"

"Correction, I have *already* repurposed this box to contain your Authority, in fact." She looked at the box in her hand, examining it closely, "I made sure to memorize the process before I left and experimented with it before I came back, I suppose. This box, once containing the Witch Factor of Sloth, will now be able to contain the Witch Factor of Vainglory."

The former Witch started to slowly nod, with them becoming faster as she better mentally prepared herself, "I understand."

Beatrice glanced up, narrowing her eyes once she saw Pandora's face, "Your expression looks unusually guilty, I suppose." At her confusion, Beatrice spoke again, "Do you perhaps regret your past actions?"

Pandora shook herself out of her daze, looking down at the Great Spirit, "What are you inquiring about?"

Said Great Spirit sighed, "Betty means what she said, in fact. At the memory of the box, your face became abnormally guilty. It's almost like you care, I suppose." She took a breath, continuing by asking, "That is why Betty asked: do you regret your past actions?"

Her eyes relaxed, as did her body. Pandora understood, now. She thought about it for a little while, genuinely trying to understand her own feelings. Some things were still foreign to her, but she believed in herself to understand just as Subaru believed in her.

She gave a small nod, looking at Beatrice with a downcast gaze, "Yes. I believe I do."

Beatrice hummed, thinking to herself, "Betty can perhaps somewhat see what her idiot contractor sees in you, I suppose." Pandora's eyes widened, ready to question Beatrice's statement, but the Great Spirit didn't give her any time to do so, "I will start the extraction process now. Prepare yourself."

After that, Beatrice opened the box and pressed it to Pandora's chest. It took less than a second for her to feel it: the unrivaled pain of something being forcefully pulled out of her body. She cried and screamed aloud, feeling every ounce of what was happening within her. Her very soul being pulled apart, as something that has been with her since her birth was forcefully ripped and torn away.

It only lasted a mere few seconds, with Beatrice hastily retracting the box and closing it. Pandora took deep breaths, falling to her knees, unable to promptly stand.

The Great Spirit looked at her handiwork before shifting her eyes to Pandora, "It is done, I suppose. I'm certain that you now will be able to live your life rather normally, with a better grasp on your emotions." Pausing for a moment, she added, "I should note that only Betty and her Subaru will be the only ones capable of opening the box, if need be."

As Pandora caught her breath, she searched within herself, metaphorically feeling around for the power she's always possessed. After doing so, she slightly looked up, "You... You did not... take it all. Why?"

Beatrice critically kept her gaze on the girl, "As you stated a week ago, the Witch Factors are the source of your longevity. Completely removing it would also rid you of that, which is why I decided to only split your Witch Factor in two, I suppose."

Pandora's eyes moved to the side, contemplating the spirit's words. She wasn't even going to start questioning how someone could have only *half* of a Witch Factor, though she supposed that it was likely similar to what the Gluttony siblings had. Either way, she was satisfied with the outcome. However, she couldn't help but ponder on how limited her abilities were now. Perhaps some practice of her own would be beneficial.

Suddenly, the door to the room burst open. Subaru stood there, looking back and forth between his lover and spirit with worry and fear clearly present on his face. He leant on the doorframe as he rapidly tried to catch his breath, "What happened, is everyone okay?!"

Both of the girls instantly winced, realizing that Subaru must've felt everything through Third Shift's connection. Beatrice quickly went to his side, grabbing hold of him comfortingly while her eyes traced his face, "Everything is fine, in fact."

Subaru looked down at her critically, "Then what happened to her?" His head referenced over to Pandora, who was starting to try and pick herself back up.

Beatrice looked over to her for a moment, then back to Subaru, "It was nothing she didn't want, in fact."

Subaru shook his head in small, rapid motions, as if in disbelief, "Nothing she didn't-okay, can you two *please* tell me what the hell is going on?!" Beatrice and Pandora then, promptly, shared a mutual glance.

Following that, after they all went back into the room, was a rather short, yet hard, explanation as to what Pandora and Beatrice were up to. Subaru remained silent the entire time, intently listening to every detail being said without any kind of interruption.

At the end he sighed, all whilst hugging Pandora's backside, his chin lightly perched on her shoulder. The two were seated on the bed; Beatrice stood in front of them with a guilty look on her face, mainly because she kept such a secret from her contractor. "I really wish you would've told me about this," he mumbled.

"I know," Pandora answered back, her head hanging a bit low. "I did not want to worry you."

Subaru smiled at her confession, placing his hand above hers in a vote of reassurance, "And I really appreciate that. But this was important, because it's entirely about you and who you are. I would've supported you, no matter what, because I *know* who you are."

She smiled, turning her hand over so that their fingers would intertwine. Turning her head a bit, she complimented, "Quite the speech there, Baru."

He shrugged, "It wasn't that good. I just spoke the truth."

Taking in a deep breath, Beatrice spoke up as well, "Betty's sorry for hiding this from you, Subaru..."

Subaru turned his head to look at her, still smiling, "Don't be sorry, Beako. If anything, I'm proud of you."

She looked up, surprised, "Huh?"

"You helped her, didn't you?" Subaru let his arm squeeze Pandora just a little bit tighter, which was something she didn't mind at all. "I didn't even need to ask you to. You did it all on your own. I'm starting to think that you're warming up to her, Beako!"

Beatrice took a step back, her face flustered, "I- I'm doing no such thing, in fact!"

Subaru laughed, while Pandora developed a rather teasing smirk. Beatrice, still flustered, did her best to compose herself by straightening her back and coughing into a fist.

"Perhaps it would be best for you to confide in us now, too, in fact," Beatrice commented without warning, throwing Subaru off.

Before he could question what that meant, Pandora spoke up as well, "Baru, you have been stressed lately. Anxious, nervous... afraid that something will jump out at you at any moment of the day. I am not blind, despite how hard you attempt to hide it."

Subaru just looked at her for a good, long moment before sighing. He took his arm away from her so that he could properly sit by her side, their hands staying intertwined at their sides. He thought to himself for a long moment before relenting, "I had a vision about a week ago."

"Is this why you had such a strong reaction so suddenly that night?" Pandora inquired, to which Subaru nodded. "What did it entail?"

He thought again, "It was more like I was watching something play out in front of me. I was at the watchtower, but... shadows swallowed it. Just... completely engulfed it whole."

Beatrice pondered to herself, as did Pandora, but it didn't take long for the both of them to reach the same conclusion. Beatrice had been the one to say something first with narrowed eyes and a grim expression, "The Witch of Envy."

Subaru nodded, "Yeah. And let me tell you, she didn't sound very happy."

Pandora averted her gaze, understanding full well what the issue was now. Subaru continued in a somber tone, "I heard voices. So many voices. All of them pleading, scared, angry..."

Beatrice lightly hummed to herself, a hand pressing to her chin as she thought, "You said that the Witch spoke to you? What did the Witch say, I wonder?" Her tone was quiet and careful.

"Not much," Subaru answered simply. "But... there were actually two voices. One was the Witch of Envy, but the other... I think the other one was Satella."

Beatrice raised an eyebrow, "Are they not one in the same?"

Subaru shook his head to deny the statement, but Pandora was actually the one to verbally deny it, "No. After Satella absorbed the Envy Witch Factor, it created a second personality within her. Satella and the Witch of Envy. Not unlike my situation, except hers is worse."

Beatrice looked at Pandora blankly, but nodded only once to convey her understanding. Soon enough, she opened her mouth again, "Well, what did *Satella* say? Was it a threat, I wonder?"

"A warning," Subaru quickly answered, more so surprising Beatrice. Pandora remained silent, thinking to herself at his side while he spoke again, "After the voices... after Satella spoke to me, I was brought to this room." He used his free hand to gesture to the room itself, then pointed at a specific desk, "I saw that desk. On top of it was one of your books, open and highlighting words as if they were being read."

Beatrice perked up a little, "Which book?"

"I dunno," Subaru admitted, shaking his head. "Before I could get a closer look at it, I was thrown at the wall and shadows filled the room..."

He trailed off, but he was sure that they got the idea. Silence consumed the room whole, with nobody willing to speak. Pandora in particular opted to show her support through physical contact, slightly leaning her head against his shoulder in a comforting manner.

After a while, Beatrice uttered questioningly to Subaru, "Did... Did it seem as though she would rampage, I wonder?"

Subaru thought about her question for a second, "I think so."

Pandora quickly narrowed her eyes at the notion, "Then we must stop it." She received two rather surprised looks after that. She only looked at Subaru, though, with a rather deadpan obvious look, "What? I am not going to let anyone like that lay their hands on you."

Beatrice coughed, "While that reasoning is certainly flawed... for the most part, I believe that focusing on some of the current issues now will help solve this one, I suppose." At her suggestion, she successfully gathered the other two's attention.

"What current issues?" Subaru inquired,

"The issues that we spoke of over a week ago, regarding the remaining Archbishops, I suppose."

At the reminder, Pandora's eyes softened as she hummed in thought, "Let us take care of the harder ones first."

Subaru nodded in both agreement and understanding, "Let me guess, Capella?"

"Indeed," Pandora confirmed. "Capella Emerada Lugnica, or now the Archbishop of Lust. Her Authority is very versatile, allowing her to transform herself and others into

various different creatures with only a mere touch. In addition, she can use her Authority to self-heal and regenerate, making her seemingly unkillable."

"Fighting at a distance might be better too, if it comes down to it," Subaru added.

"Betty remembers all of this, in fact," Beatrice said. Proceeding with an annoyed tone, she added, "And, if I'm remembering this correctly, she's also really hard to put down. So, the question is, how do we kill an unkillable person, I wonder?"

Silence filled the room as each of them individually thought to himself on the matter. When Subaru began considering certain things, his head moved in odd, funny motions, only stopping when one idea was ruled as implausible and unable to work. Eventually it seemed as though the head motions completed their cycle, with Subaru finally concluding his thoughts on some sort of plausible idea.

"I think I have an idea," he said aloud, getting the girl's heads to turn toward him. "But first, I need to ask you guys... is there any way that we can manipulate her into going somewhere specific?"

"Most probably," Pandora confirmed, turning Subaru's head. His expression became more hopeful, and dare they say excited, at the notion. She continued, "If she still follows her gospel, I can most certainly change and alter its words so that she feels compelled to go someplace in particular."

"Alright, good," Subaru nodded, turning to Beatrice next. "Beako, I know you have that weird new teleportation portal spell now, so how far could it actually take us?"

Beatrice didn't take long to respond, her tone even somewhat proud, "Quite far, in fact. Betty would say that it could take us at least halfway across the world without any trouble."

"Good enough!" Subaru exclaimed with an usually excited expression, which made the girl's minorly confused. "With any luck, this'll be quick, then."

"Would you like to fill us in on your grand plan, I wonder?" Beatrice asked, with Pandora's gaze sneakily coming her way after hearing the 'us'.

Subaru only smiled in response.

Capella Emerada Lugnica wasn't having a very great time. After that... After that *bitch* Pandora disappeared, things started falling apart. Her gospel started to act weirdly and her entire standing was left without structure. Everything fell apart so easily, quickly making her become lost in what to do with herself. It didn't help that every other Archbishop was either captured or dead, too.

That didn't last too long, though. Even though some things fell down, she was able to build them back up from the ground. Take the ashes and make something new out of it. That was fine.

It was harder than she'd necessarily thought it would be, taking way too much time to actually get a proper handle of. A lovely lady like herself didn't deserve to go through such grueling labor for something so simple; for something she deserved. Why couldn't those meat bags just do things for her, like they were supposed to?

After rebuilding her structure, gathering more followers and taking in some personal pets, she found that things seemed to be looking up for her. But she wouldn't deny that things were getting too boring. All of the chaos she caused and love she received wasn't enough, she craved more. The time that passed only served to fuel this.

Out of habit, she checked her gospel everyday. She *needed* to know if something changed; if something interesting would happen to alleviate even an ounce of her

boredom. She needed the Witch's love, her approval, her acknowledgment. That was what she deserved, so she would wait until she received it.

That was why, when her gospel suddenly told her that she'd be getting a new pet, she was absolutely elated. She was still loved, after all!

The gospel wasn't too specific, but it'd told her that this particular pet would be her best one yet; that she'd be able to go so further beyond with it unlike any other pet she's had. She shivered in delight just thinking about it — about what she'd do to this pet — as she eagerly flew to the specified location.

As she got closer to her destination, the area around her became strangely foggy, a strange must wholly surrounding her. Her nose shriveled in disgust, feeling the parts of her skin dampen with an unusual moisture. She hated it, but she kept pressing forward. She told herself that this pet would be worth the defilement of her precious, beautiful, flawless skin.

Finally, Capella arrived at the designated location. She landed gracefully on the ground, wasting no time in looking around for the pet she troubled herself and came all this way for.

The fog was thick, limiting her sight to a mere few meters in front of her. No matter how much she tried to swat it away it just came back like an annoying dog, like it was being pulled toward her or something. She groaned in disgust, still pressing forward despite her immense irritation. Then, she saw him.

A boy standing alone in the fog. His features were to kill for, his body stature was reasonable and mildly erotic... oh, he was to kill for. Just by looking at his face, she could imagine all of the different expressions he'd be making within the hour. Capella shivered in delight once more, licking her lips desirably, barely able to refrain from just rushing over and taking him for herself now.

"After these ten years of boredom and dissatisfaction," she began, gathering the boy's attention, "I, Capella Emerada Lugnica, have finally found a pet worth my time! Worthy enough to love me!"

The boy's face remained in a neutral state, but an eyebrow raised, "Ten years? Is that how long it has been?"

Capella took in that statement, deciding to play the part of the ever so caring mama, "Oh, you poor thing... you must have been lost for so long! Let this lovely lady show you the light... come to me."

He tilted his head, feigning confusion. Capella eagerly, yet very impatiently, waited for his response. Sure, she could just take him... be off with him right now and get to the fun stuff as soon as possible: but, where was the fun in that? If these animals, these poor lost creatures, came to her willingly, licking her boot and begging for her to take them home, then that was all the more better.

The boy gave her a small, genuine smile, "You are correct. I have been lost. Could you show me the way out?"

He didn't need to tell her twice. She stepped closer to him immediately, wasting no time in extending a hand out to grab him. When it was close enough, the last thing she expected was for the boy to move so incredibly fast that her eyes couldn't even keep up. He grabbed her wrist and, within an instant, she found herself being flipped over his shoulder.

Before Capella hit the grass, the boy's other hand pressed itself against her head and further thrust her into the ground. Just as suddenly as it started, she found herself buried in the ground with only her head sticking out.

"Huh? What is the meaning of this?! How dare you assault me, Capella-sama?! You taint my flawless skin with this... this... disgusting dirt." She made noises with her mouth to convey her discomfort and disgust.

He pressed a hand atop her head, keeping her stuck in the hole. Despite how much she tried to pull herself out, to transform, she found herself unable to do anything. She felt stuck to her current spot, and that immensely irritated her.

The boy let out a smug hum, "On second thought, I have already been shown the light long ago. I would rather be dead than let anyone, such as yourself, lay a hand on the one that gave that light to me."

Capella's eyes widened in disbelief before they narrowed in rage. She'd been tricked! "You pathetic, no-good meat bag! You'll-... huh?"

Confused, she looked around. He was gone. Where did he go? How could he even do that? Just who was this boy and what kind of mysterious powers did he have? If it was what she thought it was, her rage surged; she wanted nothing more than to get out of this hole and take that love away from him. He didn't deserve it, she did!

Before she had much of any time to think more about that, a peculiar smell invaded her nose. She sniffed once, then twice. Was something burning?

In her peripheral vision, she could see a bright light becoming ever so slightly brighter each passing second through the fog. Looking to the side, she saw a big ball of flame splitting through the fog and making its way toward her.

Silently to herself, she muttered a small light, "Oh." Following that, in a rather fast thinking move, she transformed the lower portion of her body and quickly began spinning, digging herself deeper into the hole so that she could avoid the blast.

The ball of flame passed over her past position soon after without issue, after which Capella herself popped out of the ground a little further back. She groaned in disgust once more; now she had even more dirt all over her skin. Whoever this attacker was, she resolved to make them pay for doing this to her.

When she gracefully put her feet against the grass, she had little time to adjust. A strange, dark hand hurriedly descended from the sky, striking at her position with vigorous enthusiasm. Capella barely dodged it in time, the hand missing and striking the ground instead. The impact created cracks on the ground's surface, but she had little time to marvel at it as the hand quickly moved up and made a swipe for her head.

Unwilling to let someone's ugly, disgusting hand touch her beautiful form, she dodged it again by ducking underneath it. However, another hand descended, striking the ground beside her. Then two more.

The hands attacked in almost perfect sync and coordination. At times they would swipe at her, other times they'd pick themselves up and attempt to crush her head as they moved positions; sometimes it would even be a combination of both, making the attacks more difficult to avoid. She found herself being momentarily pushed back, dodging as one hand after another pressed the attack on her.

Capella grit her teeth as a hand picked itself up from the ground, raising above her head and thrusting downward. She moved out of the way, the hand striking the ground while another did the same move, a different one swiping at her feet. She jumped sideways to avoid them. She was getting thoroughly annoyed.

After ducking and rolling under another swipe, she transformed her hands into sharp claw-like appendages. Wasting no time, she began to swipe at those annoying hands in an effort to eliminate their abominable presence.

She aimed for the wrists and, with one swift strike, she destroyed them. Smiling satisfyingly to herself she kept up the pace, using her claws to promptly destroy the

hands one after another with ease.

However, she found herself annoyed once again when the hands began reappearing like they'd never been destroyed in the first place. Groaning, she transformed more of her body, giving herself even more appendages in which she used to swiftly cut down all of the hands at once.

She looked up into the sky with a snarl. Enough games; that boy would pay for tricking her, attacking her, and ruining her flawless body! Wings immediately grew behind her back, her body quickly lifting off of the ground as she took to the skies in a hurry.

Though, the mist shrouded her vision; she couldn't see anything. Nobody was there; nothing at all. She looked around, teeth grit and clearly angry. She was frustrated, furious even.

Suddenly, something wrapped around her ankle. She didn't even bother looking down at it, slashing her claws and cutting whatever had grabbed hold. Dim light began to flow all around her, steadily emerging from the mist as thin, gold glowing string-like tendrils.

Confused, Capella could only watch as they circled her from all sides. The thin string-like tendrils sprung forward, wrapping around her body quickly. She gasped, her disgust rising as they invaded her skin's surface, wrapping themselves around her ankles, wrists and stomach.

She grit her teeth again, the tendrils wrapping around her limbs tighter and tighter until they completely sliced through her flesh and bone. Her hands, legs, and lower chest all promptly gravitated towards the ground while she stayed in flight. Capella didn't scream — that wasn't ladylike — but she groaned aloud in clear vexation as the tendrils hurriedly retracted.

She hurriedly began trying to heal herself, regenerating her lost body parts as fast as she could. Soon enough, her body was almost completely healed, allowing her more freedom to frantically and frustratingly look around herself for anything to target her anger on.

A whizz sounded behind her. Capella quickly whipped her head back, her eyes meeting someone very, *very* familiar to her. A long, platinum-haired girl with her arm extended back. Capella opened her mouth, "Pandora-sam-"

Before she could finish, Pandora thrust her arm forward to let her palm collide with the Archbishop's face. Capella was immediately thrown back with great force, skidding and bouncing off of the ground once before swiftly stabilizing herself in the air using the wings behind her back.

She shook her head, gathering her bearings and thoughts. Pandora... that *bitch* was fighting against her? *Her*? The Great Capella-sama?

Gritting her teeth once more, Capella groaned loudly. She was frustrated and furious. She didn't deserve this. She was Capella! She deserved all the love in the world! She shouldn't have to deal with these *bugs* dirtying her perfect form.

She'd had enough. She'd show these *insects* what happens when you try to mess with her. Despite the mist being in her way, she began to transform. Her body arrayed changing and altering itself in every way possible, becoming bigger, stronger and more fearsome than anything ever before seen.

"Beako, now!"

The sudden voice erupted in the mist before she could complete her transformation. As if on cue, she felt heavier than she'd ever had before. It wasn't exactly foreign or strange to feel heavier, especially with some of the bigger forms she could transform into, but this was different. She felt as if she would be pulled straight into the floor.

Capella hadn't even realized that she was already falling; infinitely so, in fact. Nor would she ever likely realize this fact. Even if she did, it was far too late to save herself now.

A trio emerged from the mist, the fog suddenly beginning to dissipate upon their immersion. They carefully approached the edge of the world, each of them looking down into the void below. Subaru smiled, satisfied with their handiwork, "Nice job, everyone."

"Hmph! It's only natural that Betty would play part flawlessly, in fact," Beatrice proudly boasted. "How long do I have to keep this up, I wonder?"

"I'll let you know," Subaru simply responded. Even though she probably had Vita activated long enough, it was still better to be safe than sorry. He looked over to Pandora, a cocky smile on his face, "I thought you said that this would be hard."

Pandora looked back at him, a small, proud smile of her own present on her face, "That was before you came up with this plan."

"And you're confident that this will actually kill her?" Beatrice questioned, still slightly unsure.

"Mhm," Subaru hummed in confirmation. "If this world is truly flat, with absolutely nothing after, or below, this point, then I'm sure this'll kill her. Plus, someone else that was really powerful died this way too; so, that also boosts my confidence in this."

Pandora nodded, understanding Subaru's thought process, "Not even her regeneration can save her from this."

Beatrice sighed, putting her full trust into her contractor, "Very well. Even though Betty's contractor is an idiot, he is still a genius, I suppose."

"Uh... thanks, Beako," Subaru lifted his head, turning it toward her with a smile and laugh. He loved Beatrice's tsundere-like compliments.

Pandora knelt down next to the edge, continuing to look down into it with a thoughtful expression, "A pity, she never got to finish her transformation."

Subaru looked at her, still smiling, "I think that makes it even better. Well funnier, anyway. She got sent into oblivion while her body was still compressing and morphing. She looked disgusting."

Beatrice smirked at the observation, "How poetic. She lived trying to be beautiful, yet died as a hideous abomination, I suppose."

Subaru's smile transformed into more of a smirk, accompanied by an audible, "Mhm."

"After her death, whatever following she has will likely collapse," Pandora voiced. "If not, their infrastructure will likely be too disorganized for them to actively do anything. They will be easy for any opposing force to eliminate."

After that statement, almost as if it was on cue, Subaru felt something new within him. He put a hand to his chest on instinct. It felt odd and out of place at first, bouncing every which way as if it were trying to find out where to go, but soon settled down. He waited for a moment, letting the odd feelings fade before he gave Beatrice the all clear, "Alright, I got it."

Beatrice promptly stopped using Vita, exhaling as she relaxed herself. With everything done and settled, Pandora gave Beatrice a hard look, "You have some things to explain."

Beatrice turned to look at her, "What are you talking about, I wonder?"

Pandora's eyes narrowed, "Capella off-handedly said, right before the confrontation, that ten years have passed. Is this true?"

Beatrice froze, fumbling any attempt of a response she could muster up with a continuous stutter. To Pandora, it just further proved her guilt.

Before either of the girls could properly add or say anything else, two dark hands picked them both up by the back of their clothes. They were lifted up into the air, moved back and further away from the world's edge before being gently placed back on the grass below. Their eyes tracked to Subaru, who himself used two hands to efficiently move himself between and past them.

Both Beatrice and Pandora looked at him silently. Even though his back was currently facing the both of them, they could just feel the grim and ultimately sad aura emanating off of him. Subaru probably didn't want such a conversation to take place so close to somewhere so dangerous.

"Beako." She reeled back under the weight of her nickname, lowering her head in silent preparation for what he'd say next. She expected the worst: harsh words, a scolding or even disownment. Though the words finally came out, "Is it true?"

It wasn't what she expected; just a simple question. Beatrice didn't try to open her mouth right away. Instead, her eye traced the ground below them, examining almost every single strand of grass. She had to pry them away, taking a deep breath. Finding even just a sliver of courage, she lifted her eye toward him, "I-I... Yes, in fact. It is true."

He stayed quiet, unresponsive to her stuttering confession. The Great Spirit gulped, feeling a mix of shame, guilt and depression all at once. It felt terrible, akin to what she'd felt years ago when Subaru first went missing. Looking at his back made it worse. She felt as though he'd never turn around; that he would simply march toward, leaving her behind and never coming back.

"Why?" was all that came after. Hearing his voice so low, so quiet... it didn't help the spirit at all. She could only imagine what he was thinking... Was he blaming himself? Was he scolding her, preparing to leave and break their contract for good? If either of those were the case, she didn't know if she would be able to take it.

She opened her mouth, raising a hand up as if to reach out and grab him. Yet, just as words made it to the tip of her tongue, she retracted them and closed her mouth, her hand lowering itself just after. Beatrice wasn't sure if she even deserved to speak, because what could she even possibly say? The truth? Even if she did, the truth didn't warrant her to keep it a secret for so long anyway.

Her gaze wandered for a while until it found the outlier in this situation. Pandora stood strangely alone, off to the side but not too far away. It momentarily confused Beatrice; at least, until she looked at the former Witch's face. It was downcast, the outlying characteristics of her face detailed in sadness. Why?

Beatrice found her answer soon enough. They weren't holding hands, so Cor Leonis: Third Shift was active. Pandora was still currently feeling everything of what Subaru was.

Realizing this, Beatrice redirected her gaze back to her contractor. His back was still toward her, but she understood his expression and his feelings. She needed to be honest. She needed to talk to him, to tell him the truth. He deserves that much, at least. What a failure of a spirit, she was.

She took in a puff of air, steadying her breaths so that she could speak more clearly. At last, she opened her mouth once more, words beginning to flow, "Betty... Betty has no excuse for lying to you, I suppose." Her head hung itself low, shaming herself for her incredible misdeed. "Betty saw how you reacted when she first released you. I... I was afraid that telling you the truth would hurt you more and make things worse. Betty didn't want you to blame yourself..."

At the end, she trailed off. That was all she could really say. All that she could hope for was forgiveness. Her face scrunched up as she tried her best not to cry, failing nonetheless. She could feel the first tear breach her left eye, staining her eyepatch yet still crawling its way out from under it. The tear started its journey down her cheek, where it would eventually fall to the ground with a tiny splash.

Then the second tear, breaching past the other eye this time. It would have the same journey as its friend from the other eye— or, well, that's how it should have been.

Beatrice was immensely surprised when something, or rather someone, rushed over to her and brought her into one of the tightest embraces she'd ever felt. Her arms reeled back as she was lifted into the air, the second tear flying from her cheek and onto the person's clothes, staining it.

As her bearings returned, she realized that Subaru was the one hugging her. She could hear his sniffles as he affectionately rubbed his face into her chest, crying all the while. The Great Spirit quickly became overwhelmed with sudden emotions, but mainly confusion. Why was he hugging her? Wasn't he mad at her? Wasn't he supposed to hate her?

"Beako!" he exclaimed, shockingly startling her further. He repeated the same exclamation a few more times, unrelenting in his affectionate embrace. Beatrice, hearing him cry and yell her name, over and over again, became further flooded with her own emotions, more tears threatening to fall as her arms threw themselves around his back to return the hug.

They cried together for a while; contractor and spirit, sitting in a depressed yet affectionate embrace. Pandora silently watched, her emotions conflicting as the scene played out in front of her. Breaking her neutral expression, her mouth twitched in different directions as if different feelings were clashing together for dominance. Nevertheless, at the end, her mouth settled on exhibiting a soft, small smile.

When Subaru and Beatrice separated at long last, they both were significantly red-eyed. Subaru looked at her face, taking his hand and wiping some of her tears away. She looked up at him, confused and desperately searching for answers, "Why...!"

Subaru slightly tilted his head, a small smile invading his saddened face, "My cute Beako shouldn't cry. It doesn't suit her."

Beatrice lightly pulled away, shaking his hand off of her in the process. She rapidly shook her head in denial, unwilling to just easily accept this affection without a liable reason. She looked back up at him, her red-eyes clear for him to see, "Why... Why do you show Betty this love! I... I don't deserve it."

His expression changed, his smile fading as he slowly processed her words. Then just as it disappeared it reappeared again, Subaru's eyes softly looking into her very soul with all the love she could've ever possibly hoped for. He spoke to her calmly and gently, his voice carrying an immense amount of care, "Beako, of course you deserve it. You deserve all the love in the world and more. You were just looking out for me... I- ... If anything, I don't deserve it. I've failed you, failed everyone, by leaving for so long. I can't even fathom how much you suffered, alone with nobody to confide in... to hug you and help you fall asleep at night. I'm really, really sorry, Beako."

Beatrice widened her eyes, shocked by her contractor's words, "What... No, no-... You shouldn't apologize, Betty should be apologizing! You- You did what you did to protect us- to protect me, in fact!"

Subaru took in a light breath through his nose, then exhaled it the same way, "That doesn't change the fact that I left you, left everyone, for so long. Even if I saved you then, who saved you while I was gone..."

They both knew the answer to that. His hand moved and softly took hold of her hair, picking through certain strands until he held one of an odd, unnatural color. Beatrice

understood his point, yet stayed unwilling to accept it. She didn't want to. He was doing exactly what she feared: blaming himself.

She opened her mouth to speak in protest, but found herself interrupted before she even began, "If anyone must apologize, it is I."

Both contractor and spirit's heads quickly turned toward the epicenter of the new voice, finding that it came from an unlikely source. Pandora had been the one to speak those sudden and shocking words, her head directed downward and her breathing circulating in a somewhat irregular fashion.

When she lifted her head, Beatrice could see that she was sad. The former Witch wasn't crying, but her eyes displayed enough of her emotions to clearly convey the message to anyone that looked. Her gaze softened, tracking to the ground once more as she put a hand over her heart.

"I may not be able to understand everything yet, but I know that I feel sad." Her eyes glanced at Subaru for a second, "Even through our mixed emotions, I am able to identify my own. I can better understand my own heart, what it feels and what it wants, and I know that everything that has happened is due to me."

Subaru's expression tilted for a moment, confused and contemplative. Beatrice was almost the same way, looking at Pandora oddly, as if she'd grown a second head. Subaru tried to deny her self-blame and apology, "Dora, no- this... this isn't your fault, okay? You-"

"There is nothing that you can say to change that fact, Bara," she shook her head a few times, both verbally and visually rebuking his statement. When her head settled, her eyes narrowed critically. They focused on nothing in particular as she expressed her truth, "If I had never shown up, you would have never disappeared. None of this would have happened. Everyone would be okay."

Subaru swallowed, only able to look at her after hearing those words. He knew that it emotionally hurt her to even say that, through both their connection and her expression. Despite being mostly lost for words, he was able to find some, "You were different then... you're different now..." He trailed off, his eyes wandering on their own until he found his words again, "Everyone would have been okay... except you."

She shook her head again, despite his plea. "I know. I have changed a lot because of you," as she said that, her eyes focused on him, soft, caring and full of undeniable love. "But that does not change that it was still me and who I was then. I hurt people, killed people... hurt you. Despite how much I have changed now, I cannot run from my past."

Silence then befell the space by the edge of the world. All of them wanted to speak, yet none of them could. They'd all said their piece, each of them blaming themselves for the same and different things all together at the same time. One could say that it was almost poetic.

Beatrice in particular thought to herself with anxious critique. The Great Spirit took everyone's words to heart, including her own, and decided to put them together. "Then let's face it, I suppose," she looked between her contractor and his lover, suggesting something the other two didn't much understand.

They both looked at the Great Spirit with confusion and interest. They wanted to know what she meant, eager and willing to take any and all suggestions into consideration for their own reasons, some of them similar or the same. Seeing as though she had their attention, the Great Spirit continued.

"Our pasts... we should face them, I suppose," she repeated. "Each of us have things we regret and need to face. For Betty, it is her failure." Her gaze focused on her contractor, "For Betty's Subaru, it is his guilt for being absent. You wish to make up for lost time and make things right, I suppose." Her gaze then went to Pandora, "For you, it is also your guilt of the past. You wish to face your mistakes, in fact."

Both Subaru and Pandora nodded at her, confirming that her statements were true. Pandora eased herself over to Subaru, finally reuniting their hands in a natural embrace. Pandora looked at Beatrice, both interested yet doubtful, "What do you propose?"

Beatrice looked between the two, contemplating her next words carefully before continuing, "Let's all go to the Lugnica Royal Capital, I suppose." Her odd, sudden suggestion caused the pair's eyes to widen. Beatrice continued, "There, we can find our answers. Confront our mistakes. Betty's Subaru can find and talk to everyone again; Pandora will have a chance to eliminate the last two Archbishops, while making things right along the way, I suppose."

Subaru almost shook at the sheer possibility of what Beatrice said, "They... Are they really there? Are you sure?"

Beatrice looked at him genuinely, "As far as Betty is aware; yes, most of them are, I suppose."

As Subaru silently thought to himself about what he wanted to do, Pandora pondered aloud, "What about the Archbishops?"

Beatrice's gaze shifted to her, now, "Roy Alphard and Sirius are still sealed away, locked away somewhere inside of the capital's prison. We can release and promptly eliminate them, in fact."

Pandora stayed silent, nodding her head to show that she understood. Subaru swallowed, anxiety clear on his face. Yet, he looked at Beatrice with an expression akin to both resolve and confidence, "Let's do it."

***Chapter 9*: Re:Union**

Now, I believe that this has been one of the most 'hyped up' chapters of this story. I'll let you immediately get into it. Glad to have finally been able to get here and write it.

Of course, I wasn't able to fit everything into this behemoth of a 25k+ word chapter, so it'll be continued into the next. I seriously wouldn't blame you if you need a break in the middle of this...

Anyway, don't freeze while you wait! Hahaha!... bad joke...

I should warn you all, though. There's going to be some darker tones in this one (and the next), with hints to a lot of unsavory things (not sexual, I should clarify). If that's something you're not really into, then be careful going through certain parts of this chapter. Don't be afraid to skip sections if you find something uncomfortable.

Hope you all enjoy reading, and let me know what you all think!

Chapter 9: Re:Union

"Put these on, I suppose."

Now back at the mansion, Beatrice threw two sets of identical clothing toward both Subaru and Pandora respectively.

The pair each caught it with one hand— since their other hands were still intertwined. Upon further examination, the robe was very familiar to Subaru. It was identical to the one he'd worn during the subjection of Sloth to hide his identity from Emilia and the others.

They were both white robes with a hooded mantle; though, as Subaru noted, they didn't possess the purple horns, or ears — or whatever they were supposed to be — at the top. The pair looked at Beatrice, a tad confused.

The Great Spirit sighed at seeing their expressions, "These are copies of the half-elf's old enchanted robe; Betty made them herself. It will conceal your identities without trouble, in fact. It would be idiotic to march into the capital without proper protection for the both of you, I suppose."

Subaru tilted his head, "Wait, why is it such a big issue?"

The Great Spirit merely sighed again, "You'll see." She then looked at Pandora pointedly with narrowed eyes, "As for you, we will be going shopping. Betty can't stand you wearing her contractor's clothes any longer, I suppose."

Subaru and Pandora merely shared a glance, slightly shrugging to one another before complying with her request. They put the robes on without issue, not yet having flipped up the hood, looking at Beatrice expectantly.

"Are you ready?" Subaru asked Beatrice, unsure as to whether or not his contracted spirit was fully prepared to leave.

Beatrice just nodded, "Yes. Betty has made sure to make some additional remedy before our departure, in fact." To prove her statement, she reached into her dress and pulled out a few vials of freshly made remedy. "I don't expect us to stay long, but I got extra just to be safe, I suppose."

It was Subaru's turn to nod, looking over at Pandora next, "How about you?"

"I am ready when you two are," was her simple response.

Beatrice hummed, wasting no time in hastily transporting them to the Lugnica Royal Capital. The familiar, satisfying whizz of her new teleportation spell surrounded them as they found themselves somewhere completely different and new; a dark, rather disgusting, yet empty alleyway, to be precise. The whizz faded away whilst they readjusted themselves to the new environment.

"Woah... I don't think I'll get used to that anytime soon," Subaru commented, shaking his head to snap himself out of a daze. Pandora had done something similar, the two of them accidentally tightening their grip on the other's hands to compensate.

Beatrice was relatively fine, watching quietly as the two composed themselves. Once they did, she voiced the next step of their plan, "I recommend putting those hoods up now, I suppose. We simply cannot risk anyone unnecessary seeing you two, especially together, in fact."

They did as she suggested, flipping their hoods on using their free hands simultaneously. Just after doing so, they both let out a heavy breath as they prepared for what was to come.

Then, laughter echoed throughout the alley, "Look at what fate brought us today!"

"Easy targets, haha!"

"A little girl and... her mommy and daddy?" more laughter followed after that bizarre, completely inaccurate, assessment.

The trio turned to face the voices, which had come from deeper within the darkness of the alley. Out of it emerged another trio, dressed in what looked to be rags with overall scruffy-looking features.

Immediately, Subaru recognized them. He scoffed, mostly out of disbelief at the absurdity the situation presented than anything else, "How in the actual hell are you three still doing this? It's been ten years!"

One of the thugs, the big one, looked at him with a snarl, "Are you mockin' us?!"

The skinny one answered, "I dunno, Ton. Sure seemed like it."

"He seemed to recognize us, too! Have we met?" The tiny one asked, a curious and thoughtful expression finding its way onto his face.

Pandora looked at Subaru oddly, "Are these the thugs that you told me about? The ones that... hurt you."

Subaru could tell that she wanted to use different wording, yet stopped herself. Pandora's tone delivered an underlying message to him that he didn't like, yet Subaru still looked back and nodded, "That's them, alright. I'd recognize these three bozos anywhere."

Pandora's head snapped toward them in an instant. The hood of the robe may have blocked it, but the three thugs shivered under the effects of Pandora's deathly glare.

"Kan, pull out the knife!" The tiny yelled out in panic, feeling terrifyingly more exposed than he should.

"I got it, Chin!" The skinny one, Kan, pulled out his knife and, with a shaking hand, pointed it at the trio in an offensive manner. The big one, Ton, got himself ready to brawl, but his face showed everyone how scared he really was, and the tiny one, Chin, cowered behind them.

Pandora took a step forward, absolutely ready to unleash hell upon them. The only thing that stopped her was Subaru's hand, interwoven with her own, that tightened but

lightly held her back, "Dora, don't."

"They hurt you," her response was quick and unhesitant. Her gaze never moved away from the crooks before her, even as Subaru held her back.

"You're trying to change, remember? This isn't the way that things should go," he reasoned, his voice calm and steady. "Yes, they hurt me, but it's okay. I'm here with you now and I'm not going anywhere. You don't need to go so far over something so little."

"It may be little to you, but not to me."

"Dora, please."

She heard his plea, desperately begging for her not to go through with what she felt was justified. Pandora kept her glare, drilling into the souls of the scum that poisoned her eyes. After a few moments of silent contemplation, she began taking slow, deep breaths. It gradually calmed her, clearing her head and helping her consider better choices.

In a silent move, Pandora used her Authority; after such, the trio of thugs disappeared. Subaru and Beatrice panicked out of habit, but Pandora turned to them, a small smile on her face, and voiced, "I made it so that they never walked down this alley."

Subaru silently looked at her for a moment before he smiled back, "Good job, Dora. I'm proud of you."

She smiled a little more, happy to hear his praise. Beatrice coughed, trying to gain their attention, "Ahem, if you two don't mind, we should get moving, I suppose."

"Oh, yeah!" Subaru exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "Where to first, Beako?"

Elsewhere, in the middle of an empty, dark alleyway, three crooks found themselves suddenly appearing out of thin air. All three, whilst still on their feet, were dazed and uncertain, looking around one another in blatant confusion.

"Wha- What the hell?! How did we end up here?!"

"I dunno, Ton." Chin said. "It must've been that crazy lady's power or somethin'."

Kan groaned, clearly annoyed. "Who cares? We just made a mistake with our target that time. Let's pick the right one this time."

Ton hummed in short, thoughtful agreement, looking around their new location for a new possible target. His eyes wandered for a little bit before lying on a cloaked figure, face hidden and walking right toward them. "How 'bout that one?"

The other two looked in the direction he referenced, silently agreeing to target the newcomer. They moderately spread out, pulling out whatever weapons they had whilst doing their best to look intimidating.

"Give us everything you've got!"

"Yeah, everything!"

The figure stopped in its tracks, completely unmoving. The only part of their body the crooks could see was the figure's mouth; it was slightly agape, taking in small breaths one after another. The figure's head remained still, as if it didn't even bother to look up at them.

"*Get out... of my way,*" the figure's voice was cold, sharp and pierced through them like a knife in butter. Despite how much it shook them, they stood tall with an unwillingness to let a target get away again.

They pressed their attack. If this person wasn't going to take them seriously and comply with their demands, then they'd just take what they wanted by force. The three thugs stepped forward in unison... then suddenly stopped in unison, too.

In an instant, at the same time, all three of them experienced the exact same thing. Their bodies rose in the air, suspended and unmoving as each of their breaths staggered and struggled for any ounce of air.

A splitting pain ran through their bodies, starting from between their legs and straight up into their core. Everything felt cold, inside and out, before that frost turned into more of an unnatural warmth that grew eerily stronger.

They didn't know what happened, barely even able to move their heads to catch a glimpse of the scene. Their brains, hardly able to function anymore, were able to recognize the sight of their own blood dripping onto the ground, creating respective puddles for each of them.

Under the blood, a thin line of what seemed to be clear crystal was barely registered by their eyes. They slowly followed the trail, which led straight to the heel of the mysterious figure's foot. The figure's face remained unchanging, indifferent to their dying forms while it stepped forward. As their vision grew blurrier, the figure stepped past without sparing a single glance.

That day, three thugs died... and nobody batted an eye.

"Should this really be the priority, right now?"

"Yes, it is. As said before, Betty is tired of seeing you dressed like my contractor, in fact."

"Ah, c'mon, Dora, don't you think this one looks pretty good?"

"No, and I do not care. I would much rather wear this than do any needless shopping."

The trio found themselves walking around in a local shopping district, specifically one that sold clothing, to try and find Pandora a new outfit to wear. It didn't have to be said, but Pandora herself was rather grumpy about the whole thing. Her face said it all — despite them being unable to see most of it — with furrowed eyebrows and a sporting frown to top it all off.

Subaru, who was unusually energetic, smiled over at her, "Don't be so grumpy! There's a lot here to choose from!" He used his free hand to gesture at all of the possible options available to them. "As much as I love twinning with you, I think it'd be nice for you to have at least *one* outfit for yourself."

She stopped walking, standing rather defiantly in one spot. Subaru, activating Third Shift for a moment, stepped before her and turned to face her more directly. She crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes under the hood of the robe. Subaru only kept his smile, tilting his head forward as if to say, "C'mon, it'll be fun."

After a stalemate that only lasted a few seconds, Pandora's mouth flattened as she made a sound of disapproving annoyance. She turned to the side, her eyes softening ever so slightly yet holding onto a special reluctance, "I unfortunately cannot bring myself to say no to you."

Subaru perked up, his smile seemingly widening as he positioned himself next to her again, "Great! Let's go!"

Pandora sighed, uncrossing her arms and letting their hands intertwine again. She began glancing over at some of the nearby products, "I still find this rather unnecessary..." she trailed off, lowering her voice to a whisper and leaning in closer to

Subaru, "and I am also aware that you are doing this most prominently to delay your reunion."

Subaru's mood outwardly dropped for a split second, but quickly rebounded. He too lowered his voice, leaning close to Pandora so he could respond, "I'm nervous and... I'm scared. I'm still trying to prepare myself mentally a little... yeah."

Pandora nodded, "I understand. Take your time; just know that I am here for you whenever you may need me." She lightly squeezed his hand to put weight on her statement, which he appreciated.

They started slowly walking throughout the district again, looking at the displays as they passed. Beatrice, who had been the most active thus far by running around different places in search of specific things, pointed out something in particular, "How about that one, I wonder?"

Subaru and Pandora both turned toward it, Pandora in particular quickly denying it, "No. Too colorful."

"Yeah, I agree, it's a little too... flamboyant," Subaru voiced in agreement.

Beatrice looked at him oddly, "What does that word even mean, I suppose."

"Flamboyant means that the style of something attracts a lot of attention," Pandora answered, winking at her from behind her hood. Beatrice quickly glared at her, but Pandora only smiled at the Great Spirit before going back to browsing with her eyes.

Beatrice did the same thing, averting her gaze with audible annoyance. Soon, she found something else to suggest, "What about that one, I wonder? That one isn't as colorful as the other."

The other two looked at the next one, "That one is... too dark."

"It looks like it's got a weird little thing on the end of it, too. What even is that..."

As Pandora and Subaru criticized the second outfit she picked out, Beatrice's eyebrow twitched. Immediately, she began looking for another, "That one then, I wonder?!"

They then looked at the new one. This time, Subaru spoke up first, "Beako, that one's for men."

Beatrice only crossed her arms, puffing her cheeks and looking away, "Not like that matters..."

Subaru, hearing her comment, shook his head disapprovingly, "That's not very nice, Beako."

The Great Spirit turned on her heel, pivoting herself to face him and stomping her foot on the ground. She glared up at him, frustrated and annoyed, "Then stop nitpicking everything Betty suggests, I suppose!" She then uttered under her breath, "It's not like what I said wasn't true..."

Subaru sighed, "Maybe we should just let her decide for herself. It'll probably be smoother that way, right?"

She was about to retort, but stopped herself midway. The more Beatrice considered it, that route would probably be both the fastest and would give her less of a headache. She hummed, "Fine. Just have the outfit be reasonable, I suppose."

Pandora gave her a side glance, choosing to ignore Beatrice's earlier comment about her figure, "You say that, yet you chose some of the most unreasonable things here for me to wear."

Beatrice only mumbled to herself in response, unwilling to start any kind of argument just yet, while Pandora proceeded to start browsing a little more. Subaru and Beatrice followed her around as they went from place to place, looking at all kinds of different and unique outfits, yet none of them actually seemed to appease the former Witch.

Until one outfit in particular caught her eye, stopping her dead in her tracks. She went over to it, examining it from top to bottom before even coming to any type of conclusion, "This one."

Subaru, still by her side, looked at it thoughtfully, giving small nods of acknowledgement, "Well, it certainly represents you and seems to be your size. Do you want to try it on just to make sure?"

Pandora didn't answer, instead just picking it up with her free hand and looking at Subaru expectantly. He laughed a little, his gaze wandering in search of someone that could show them to a changing area. Soon enough, he found someone restocking some clothes not too far away.

Subaru motioned toward the attendant, which triggered them all to go toward the person. When they got close enough, the attendant's back faced them as Subaru cleared his throat and spoke up, "Excuse me, are there any private changing rooms around here that we can use?"

The attendant finished putting the last piece of clothing up, then quickly began turning around to face them. Subaru instantly froze, finally noticing her features as they came face-to-face. It was too soon... he wasn't ready.

"Of course there are!" She exclaimed, a large smile on her face as she pointed in a particular direction. "There's one right over the-..." she trailed off, her expression immediately falling as she looked at the only oddity in their group, "Beatrice...?"

Having been addressed, the Great Spirit looked up and, similar to Subaru, seemingly froze on the spot. Although, unlike Subaru, she was able to quickly recompose herself, "Hello... Petra, it has been a while."

Right... right, Petra was standing right in front of him. The little Petra he used to know... the one that had a crush on him and worked her butt off trying to be a maid. She was in front of him, yet she was so different. She had longer hair, still sporting her red ribbon accessory, but now it was longer, reaching just past her shoulders. Her clothes were common, but were of high quality.

Petra nodded at Beatrice's statement, her face sorting through a plethora of different expressions portioning to her feelings before settling on one of indifference, "It has. Last time I saw you, it was ten years ago."

Beatrice subconsciously tried to avert her gaze, but her mind wouldn't let her and subsequently refocused them back on the girl in front of her, "Betty has been busy, I suppose." The Great Spirit then looked at Petra down, then up again, before commenting, "You've grown, in fact."

"I had to," Petra answered simply, her tone a tad edgy and broken. Suddenly she took one step toward, slightly tilting her head to the side and keeling down in front of the Great Spirit. She raised her hands, slowly and gently putting them against Beatrice's features. The Great Spirit didn't seem to mind as Petra continued to examine her, fingers lightly running over her eyepatch, "What happened to you?"

Petra's words were as gentle as her touch, causing Beatrice to react strangely. The Great Spirit's face mixed between emotions, but settled on neutrality, "Betty has been very busy, I suppose."

Petra's eyes continued to wander over Beatrice's features, silently noting each and every one of the differences she found. Despite that, the girl nodded, her face

contorting in different ways, showing that she was trying very hard to hold back some of her deeper emotions, "You've been through a lot."

They were silent for a little while, but Petra soon sniffled which broke her out of whatever daze she found herself in. She averted her eyes downward, using an arm to wipe them once or twice before looking back up. Her head motioned toward Pandora and Subaru, who was still frozen in place.

"Are these people with you?" Petra asked quietly, similarly examining them with curious eyes.

Beatrice momentarily stammered to respond, but seeing as how Subaru was in such a desperate state she thought of something quick, "No... No, they're not with Betty, I suppose." Her gaze went over to Pandora, using her eyes to motion to the changing area, "But I do believe they wished to try something on, in fact."

"Oh, right!" Petra exclaimed, her mood rising with false enthusiasm as she picked herself up from the floor and smiled at the two, "I'm very sorry for the interruption! The changing rooms are over there! When you're done please bring this outfit back to me; if you like it, I can help you pay but, if not, I'll have to wash it."

Pandora nodded, "Thank you very much, we will be going now."

With that, Pandora did her best to drag Subaru out of the area and into the changing room. It was a bit of a hassle, since Subaru was barely able to register things at the moment, but she got there fairly quickly and promptly secluded themselves.

She removed her hood, then removed his. She stood in front of him, seeing how his eyes stared blankly ahead at absolutely nothing in particular. "Baru, snap out of it... you're okay. Take deep breaths," she pleaded with him, taking his other hand within her own to convey as much comfort and reassurance to him as possible.

She noticed the exact moment he fell out of his daze. Upon having been directly addressed, he heard her words and did his best to comply with the actions suggested to him. His grip on her hands tightened somewhat, from what Pandora assumed to be due to his stress or anxiousness.

After a minute or so of breathing, he looked at her with eyes that practically *begged* for help, "I can't... I can't talk to her, it's too soon. I'm not ready."

Pandora's eyes were soft, caring and careful, "You can. If you do not try now, you may never get another chance again."

Subaru's train of thought ended upon that realization, pausing as new thoughts, mostly of self-doubt, came to mind, "What if I mess it up?"

Pandora shook her head in denial, "You will not. But, if you do, I will be here for you; Beatrice will, too."

Subaru remained quiet for a moment, processing everything before coming to a decision. He nodded slowly at first, but as he built up motivation those nods became more rapid, "Yeah- alright, you're right. I'll try."

Pandora smiled, tightening her grip on his hands for a second before releasing one and motioning to the changing area, "While we are here..."

"Go for it. I'd love to see how it looks on you," Subaru smiled a bit flirtatiously, further encouraging Pandora to try on the outfit she picked out.

Pandora picked up on his flirtatious smile. She quickly realized that, while it was genuine, it was more of a way for him to better focus on something else before he had to talk to the girl outside. She only kept her own smile as she let go of his hand, Cor Leonis: Third Shift in effect, to go put on her new clothes.

From the moment she went in, he knew it probably wouldn't take long for her to come out. Right he was; Pandora emerged only a couple of minutes later and, the exact moment he saw her, his mouth went agape.

Subaru marveled at the sight. Pandora wore something akin to a skirt, colored in nothing but a pure white that matched her natural glow. It was a one-piece, strapping over her shoulders with comfortable ease. It barely went down to her knees, just hanging above them. The length was rather small, but the hem sat not far from her skin and flowed nicely in the wind. The ends of the hem were patterned with slightly curved seams that added to the stunning, unique look.

The outfit had also come with a pair of shoes, which matched the pure white color and fit Pandora's feet rather well. They were simple in design, being slip-on shoes that possessed two straps that went over the wearer's foot to keep it in place. They were more or less comfortable, as well. In addition, Pandora had also picked up some private necessities in which she wore underneath her one-piece clothing.

Subaru nodded approvingly, "Simple and plain, but it suits you. It really does."

Pandora kept her smile, "Thank you. I am very glad that you like it." She took the robe in her hands, slipping it back on as she made her way back over to Subaru. The tracksuit she had on remained under her shoulder, carrying it as she walked, "Let us try not to ruin it so soon."

He laughed a little, "Yeah, let's."

As she made her final steps toward him, she picked up her feet and weirdly examined her new shoes, "These feel a bit odd, though."

Subaru chuckled, "Well, that happens when you don't wear shoes for four-hundred years or so. You'll just have to get used to them."

"I regret it already," she mumbled, playfully shaking her head. They went hand in hand again, facing the exit. Subaru took a deep breath, preparing himself for what was about to happen. Pandora glanced at him, "Are you ready?"

He took in another breath, "Yeah, I'm ready."

Pandora flipped up her hood, Subaru didn't. They both walked out into the main area, aiming right to where both Petra and Beatrice were talking. The girls had moved off to the side a little more, secluding themselves from most of the general populace around.

Petra was nodding, likely in reference to previous dialogue that neither Pandora nor Subaru heard, "So, you haven't heard from them either..." she trailed off, scratching her arm as she thought to herself, "so, Beatrice, what're you even doing here?" She raised a hand, as if to stop the Great Spirit from doing something, "And don't say that it was just to visit, we both know that's not why."

Beatrice stayed silent, using her eyes to survey the area behind Petra. When she saw her contractor coming toward them without his hood up, she realized what was about to happen, "You'll understand in a moment, I suppose."

Petra furrowed a brow, "What do you me-"

Subaru cleared his throat, interrupting her mid-question, "Excuse me, miss, but I'm looking for someone and could use some help."

Petra momentarily put on a smile filtered with false enthusiasm, turning around to face and help whichever customer needed her help. But, as soon as she did so, her smile immediately dropped. An audible gasp sounded from her mouth, a hand moving to cover it. She reeled and took a step back in surprise, her eyes widening as if she'd just seen a ghost.

Subaru waited patiently for her to recover, a small smile gracing his face, "Hey, Petra. It's so good to see you."

Petra shook her head in small motions, as if denying the sight in front of her. She moved her head down and up, examining him in full to better convince herself of what was happening. She moved a step forward, hands raised and motioning like she wanted to grab hold of him.

Her eyes graced his face, "Is this... are you really you- here?"

Subaru kept his smile, giving her a small couple of nods in confirmation as she stuttered her words, "Yeah, I'm really here."

Her mouth quivered upon hearing the sound of his voice again. Her eyes trembled, beginning to water despite how hard she fought against it. Then, in an instant without any warning, she pressed herself against him in a tight hug.

Subaru had to take a step back at the sudden pushing force, but didn't reject it. His gaze softened while his expression actively showed his remorse; Subaru's free hand slowly and gently went around her back, returning the hug.

It continued like that for a while, with Subaru gently returning her embrace as she cried into his chest. Her cries were more like desperate wails, her grip holding him so tight from the fear that he'd just disappear again. The ordeal even drew quite a few eyes from people passing by, but that didn't bother the four of them.

Eventually, to help Petra relax, his hand began rubbing her back in small, gentle circles. He activated Third Shift for a moment, separating his hand from Pandora's so that he could put it on Petra's head.

Petra's breath staggered once he started giving her headpats. Instinctively, her body seemed to relax under the combination of familiar, comfortable feelings. She took time to both mentally and physically recover, her sniffles easing and her breathing becoming steadier bit by bit. Subaru didn't stop his actions the entire time.

He knew that Pandora was pouting, but that was fine; he'd be sure to give her some headpats later to make up for it, if that's what she wanted. Right now though, Petra was his priority.

As she calmed down, he was constantly reminded of the girl he used to know. The one that stayed strong, helped encourage him and was all around a kind hearted person. Seeing her so upset, so broken, tore his heart apart.

At some point, her grip around him loosened and she began to pull away. He obliged, removing his own hand from around her back and re-establishing his connection with Pandora using the other. Petra looked at him, now red-eyes with tears still visible on her cheeks.

"Why- How-..." she stuttered, shaking her head and trailing off multiple times before she was able to formulate a proper sentence. "I have so many questions."

Subaru nodded once, laughing a little to try and lighten the mood, "I don't blame you. I have a lot of questions, too."

She looked at him with a sense of longing, like she'd been waiting for this day over the course of many, many years, "Subaru... you don't know how much we've all missed you."

"I've missed you all too... so, so much," Subaru voiced in a genuine, almost broken, tone.

Petra shook her head again, looking at him up and down as if to conceive some sort of consensus with herself, "I don't understand... How are you even here right now? I thought you... I thought that you were gone."

She threatened to tear up again. Subaru frowned at seeing her in such a state, using his free hand to pat her head in an attempt to comfort her. She looked at him pleadingly, wanting to understand but also desperately hoping that he was real and wouldn't just suddenly disappear.

"Please... Please tell me," she begged, tears threatening to fall from her eyes once again. "I don't want this to be fake- I don't want it to be another hallucination- I..."

Subaru's heart shattered upon hearing those words. He looked down, shaking his head but glancing up at her, "It's complicated."

"I'm not a little girl anymore. I'll understand everything you tell me, so just... please..." Petra looked at him with desperate big sad eyes as she pleaded with him again.

Subaru didn't do anything for a small, few seconds before nodding, "Alright. We'll tell you everything. Let's just... Let's just find somewhere private first, okay?"

Petra seemed to stiffen, looking around the area to see a few people silently watching her outburst. A minor form of embarrassment welled up within her, her face becoming a little red as she ashamedly looked down, nodding once after the fact.

They proceeded to find someplace quiet to continue their conversation. Petra took a moment to close up the shop before heading out with them, which nobody really minded. The entire walk was silent, nobody speaking a word the entire time. Petra only kept glancing at him every now and again, still seemingly in some form of disbelief. He couldn't blame her; in a sense, he couldn't believe what was happening either.

When they finally found somewhere — that somewhere being an abandoned building not too far away from Petra's workplace — Subaru wasted no time in explaining the current circumstances to her. Beatrice even pitched in on certain parts to provide more clarity with her point of view. Pandora stayed silent the entire time, not wanting to interject and insert herself into a compromising situation that didn't involve her.

By the end, Petra was floored; she was feeling shocked, surprised, angry, happy and upset all in one neatly wrapped package. She looked at both Subaru and Beatrice incredulously, "I can't believe it..."

Subaru chuckled in an attempt to lighten the mood, "Neither can I, honestly."

Petra kept looking between both contractor and Great Spirit, "You two... You guys have been through so much, I-..." she brought an arm up to her eyes to wipe them, ensuring that more years wouldn't fall, "I'm sorry for acting like a little kid, I'm just... I'm just so..."

Subaru leaned forward, putting a hand lightly on her shoulder to convey a sense of reassurance, "You don't need to be sorry. Please don't apologize when you have nothing to apologize for. You did nothing, and I mean *nothing*, wrong."

Petra nodded to his words, understanding what he was saying and silently appreciating the sentiment. Subaru retracted his hand and put it back to his side, waiting for anything else Petra had to say. He didn't have to wait too long, "Spending an eternity in a void... I couldn't imagine how hard that must've been."

"It got better," he said in response, not missing much of a beat.

"Did it...?" she trailed off, her eyes blankly staring ahead of her as she mentally considered something. After a few seconds, they changed as she looked up at Subaru with sharp eyes, "Can I ask you something?"

Subaru perked up a little, shifting himself in his seat, not noticing the change in her behavior, "Of course you can."

Her head and eyes darted over to Pandora, blankly staring at her with unknown intent, "Why should I let *her* be here?"

Subaru froze, as did Beatrice, both of them sharing a glance due to sudden nervousness and unease, "Uhm... What are you talking about, Petra?"

"You know what I'm talking about," her eyes never moved away from the hooded former Witch. Pandora just silently sat there, watching as Petra slowly rose from her seat. "Why should I let her be here, living and breathing the same air as you and I after everything she's done?"

Subaru stammered, "I-I don't know what you mean, that's not-"

This time, Petra directed her sharp gaze to him, "Don't try and trick me. You might be able to trick other people, but I'm not a little girl anymore." Her eyes went back to Pandora, watching the former Witch closely as she continued, "Who else would this be? As much as it's like you to help random people, the chances of this being the very same *Witch* that trapped you in that *damn seal* for an *eternity* is too high. Why else would this person be wearing Emilia's enchanted robe?"

Subaru didn't know what to do; he hadn't planned for this, or even considered it happening. Petra was smart and had figured it out too quickly for neither him nor Beatrice to realize. He looked at Beatrice for guidance, not knowing what to say or do, but she just gave him the same look.

Without warning, Petra quickly put a hand behind her back and lunged forward. Subaru and Beatrice immediately stood, ready to act in defense if need be, but they were too late. Petra had, within a second, reached into a holster located on her back thigh and pulled out a small dagger, holding it in a backwards grip to Pandora's throat.

Still Pandora sat there silently, only moving her head slightly back to avoid the blade. She didn't even make as much as a single noise. Petra glared at the former Witch, further pressing the dagger's blade a little closer to her throat.

Subaru put his hands up, "Petra, it's okay. We're- We're not under any type of spell or anything and-"

"I know," she interrupted, not taking her eyes off of Pandora for even a second. "You're probably going to say something like 'she's changed, she's better now,' but I don't want to hear it from you," she paused, using her eyes to motion toward the hood of the robe. "Pull down the hood."

Pandora silently obliged, doing so without an issue. When the hood came down, Petra was blessed with seeing Pandora's entire face. The former Witch's expression was blank, neutral and unchanging, all while Petra pressed the blade to her neck in a continuously threatening manner.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked, her voice laced with a thin line of venom which made itself incredibly blatant. Petra intently studied Pandora's eyes, looking for any and all bits of emotions that may be flowing through them.

Pandora remained silent for a while, even as Petra referenced the threat to her. Subaru was incredibly tempted to interject, but he feared that it may only make things worse. He reluctantly stayed silent, deciding to let the situation play out on its own whilst remaining vigilant.

Pandora steadily opened her mouth, catching everyone's attention. She didn't speak right away, causing everyone's anxiousness to rise, but she quickly found her words, "There is not much to say." At first, it seemed as though Petra was dissatisfied with that answer, but Pandora suddenly spoke again. "I can only offer my apologies," that seemed to shock Petra, her eyes widening for a split second before readapting to their previous sharp glare, "I recognize my wrongdoings. I know that I cannot deny my past, but I wish to do better. I am truly sorry."

Pandora's words were simple, unpracticed and sloppy, yet they seemed to reach the inner depths of Petra's being. Her hand shook with the knife in her hand, her mouth

trembling while her teeth clenched in a show of frustration. She tried to build a resolve to go through with what she wanted to do, but, in the end, she reluctantly pulled away.

A large puff of air left her body as she backed away, placing her dagger back into its holster. Subaru found himself glued in place, unable to decide where he should go and what to do with himself. Pandora's hand momentarily tightened around his, indicating that she was doing okay.

Subaru looked toward Petra, obvious concern occupying his face, "Are you okay? Why- What exactly just happened?"

Petra looked at him, her eyes no longer as sharp as they once were. "I'll be fine," she then shifted her gaze to Pandora again with a glare, "I only stopped because I can tell that she's guilty. No truly evil person has so much remorse." She paused, taking a breath, her glare easing while her head shifted downward, "Just know... even though you have that guilt and choose to apologize, there are going to be some people that just won't accept it."

Subaru turned his head over toward Pandora, seeing that, while her baseline expression remained blank, her eyes were downcast and held her remorse. He could tell that she understood Petra's words, having taken them to heart.

Petra recovered her composure and went back to sit next to Beatrice, who'd ended up calming down herself and proceeded to watch the events play out by sitting quietly. Now, though, Beatrice decided to speak up, "Now that your aggression has subsided, could you inform us of what's been happening here within the last decade, I suppose."

Subaru realized that incredibly obvious missing detail as Beatrice mentioned it, perking up and addressing Petra directly as well, "Yeah, I have a lot of questions. How are you? How have things been? What's been going on all this time? Who got elected as the next ruler?" While he still had more, he thought it best to stop there for now.

Petra looked at them with a tilted, confused gaze, "What..." she mumbled, "What are you talking about? How do you not know the answer to some of those questions if you've been walking around the Capital?" She paused, considering something to herself, "How long have you guys even been here?"

"Not too long before we saw you," Subaru answered quickly.

"Yeah, okay... but how have you not seen... how exactly did you guys get here, again?" Petra was still, clearly, confused.

"Through teleportation, in fact," Beatrice answered.

Petra blinked at Beatrice once, then twice, before letting out a big, tired sigh. She contemplated to herself for a moment, uttering aloud, "That actually explains a lot..." as she trailed off, her head moved to look at all three of them, "There's something you all need to see, then."

"What..." Subaru mumbled, taking slow steps forward. His mouth was agape in both amazement and disbelief, unable to properly fathom what he was looking up at.

Beatrice stood next to him on his left, Pandora standing next to him on his right. They too felt similar to him, looking up at such a gargantuan figure in the middle of the Lugnica Royal Capital with him. As they approached, the three saw a stand which held a rather large, smoothly cut stone at its center. Walking over to it, Subaru saw that it had words on it.

He gazed down at them, opening his mouth and preparing to read out loud, "Under the guidance of Queen Felt, this statue stands to commemorate the heroic actions, deeds and sacrifices of the young Natsuki Subaru."

He had to pause, taking in the words he'd just read. It was all so surreal. His mind was unable to properly understand how or why this even existed, thinking himself unworthy or even incapable of receiving something like this.

He continued on, "He heroically gave his life to seal away yet another inconceivably dangerous threat. Before that, he always put himself in the line of danger for both his friends and allies. He was taken from this world far too soon. Despite being normal and weak, he was able to conquer and overcome what many of us had deemed impossible."

Underneath lay a list of his achievements. It was longer than he thought it would be, listing everything from saving Irlam Village to conquering the Watchtower. In all honesty, he was absolutely stunned and amazed. He didn't know what to think, much less say.

"There's actually a few more of these around the Capital, just not as... well, big," Petra got their attention, coming close to the statue and leaning on one of the guardrails as she gestured up to it.

She stayed silently for a little while, taking her time to admire the sight in front of her. She took easy breaths, her eyes momentarily unwavering until she seemed to remember what was going on.

She snapped herself out of her face, looking at the stone Subaru had read off of, "If that second part seemed a bit unnatural for an engraving, it's because it's actually a part of the speech Queen Felt used when she got crowned." Petra looked up at the statue again, "You know, her first decree as Queen was to have this built..." she trailed off, eyes softening as they continued to admire the gargantuan figure, "a lot of us pitched in to provide your achievements and what you've done for everyone, too."

Subaru stayed silent, directing his gaze back upward to look at the statue before him. It was very, very big, sporting his signature tracksuit, expression and pose. He almost couldn't believe that they'd gotten everything so accurate. When he looked around, he saw that there were actually quite a few people there admiring and reading about it. Luckily, he and Pandora had their robes on with their hoods up, so they wouldn't be noticed.

Nevertheless, that wasn't the point of all this.

His head tracked downward, his hand anxiously squeezing against Pandora's. She squeezed back, his heart taking in the support and holding it close as he readied himself for the question he was about to ask, "Petra... what happened to everyone?"

She didn't answer right away, her posture still leaning against the guardrail. Then, suddenly, in a fit of frustration she slammed her hands against the railing, emitting an echoed bang and effectively shocking Subaru, "There aren't many of us left."

Subaru's heart skipped a beat as his mind desperately held onto the hope that his worst fears weren't realized. He hesitantly asked, "What do you mean?" Petra shook her head, backing away from the railing and standing more in the open. Everyone turned to face her, uneasily awaiting her response.

At last, she uttered, "After you... After you disappeared, things went downhill pretty quick. The entire camp fell apart. Emilia and Beatrice secluded themselves off, the twins became more guarded and secretive..." she sighed, "everyone changed a lot. Everyone became sadder and didn't know what to do with themselves. And I... I couldn't do anything to cheer them up, despite how much I tried."

They all listened to her speech intently, even Pandora. She eagerly wanted to know what had happened to the state of the world after she took Subaru away... it was a part of learning how to atone for what she's done. Beatrice, on the other hand, developed a rather guilty look, very well remembering her behavior during that time and openly showing her regret for it.

"I was the one that had to talk to the Sword Saint when he came... nobody else would, because he specifically asked for you," she shook her head, sadly remembering the conversation she'd had with him. "I still remember his face when I told him what happened... or, at least, what Beatrice decided to share. I swear, he must have thought so low of himself at the time..."

Guilt overwhelmed Subaru at that moment. He knew that Reinhard had things rough overall, but knowing that his disappearance made things even worse was hard to bear. Pandora was feeling the same way if not worse, remembering how much she'd destroyed the Astrea family over the course of the last hundred years... including the death of the former Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, which she actively assisted in.

"It wasn't long after that day when Frederica nee-sama quit, followed soon by Otto-san and Garfiel," she sighed. "They'd realized that the atmosphere there had gotten worse and decided to leave. Instead of going back to Irlam, Louise, Meili and I decided to go with them... and we ended up here, in the Capital."

She paused, taking a moment to survey the area around them, hugging herself as if to keep herself safe. Subaru could only look on with immense guilt, unwilling to say anything until she finished her story.

"We were all on our own with practically nothing..." she mumbled, chuckling to herself in false amusement. "Frederica nee-sama tried to take care of us but we were really poor, scrounging to make ends meet so we had to resort to... to..."

When she trailed off, the hug she placed around herself grew tighter as she shivered in place. Recalling the event shook her, terrified her even, and it made Subaru fear the worst. He didn't know what she was referring to, nor did he think he really wanted to find out. Either way, it didn't change the fact that he so desperately wanted to run over to her, hug her and reassure her that he was here to protect her... to help her.

Yet, he knew that he was already too late for that.

Beatrice grabbed his other hand, giving it a light squeeze to show her support. He mentally thanked her, recomposing himself just as Petra did. He eyed her closely, watched as her expression fell and her arms reluctantly relaxed.

She continued on, "Otto-san went back to being a merchant... I don't see him often, but he comes by every once in a while. He drinks a lot more than he used to, though..." She paused, taking a moment to carefully consider her next words, "The Sword Saint saw Garfiel's potential and took him in to train as a knight. Meili, Louise and I lived as roommates for a while before we each chose our own profession. I studied to become a tailor and Louise became a chef, while Meili followed in Garfiel's footsteps and joined the knights."

Subaru's gaze softened, opening and closing his mouth in an attempt to form words and ultimately failing to do so. Alternately, his mind went into overdrive thinking about what everyone must've gone through because of him.

Then, he realized something. Everything from his facial expressions and thoughts paused in an instant, his head looking up and giving Petra a both worried and confused stare, "Petra... What about Frederica?"

Immediately, she flinched. He heard a sniffle, her head turning away so that she didn't have to look at him. She hugged herself again, attempting to calm herself down, "Frederica nee-sama is... she's..." she kept trailing off, unable to finish her statement as she became more emotional. She took in another staggering breath, picking her head up and finally finishing the hard-to-say statement, "Frederica nee-sama is dead."

Subaru froze, feeling it wash over him like a tidal wave hitting his body. Beatrice was shaken up too, but it wasn't as bad as Subaru. No, not nearly so. Those were the last words he'd wanted to hear. His eyes went blank, his mind going into a daze. Pandora's

comforting and reassuring squeezes were the only things that kept his mind from going completely into the dark.

He managed to garner up some courage, some form of sense, to slightly open his mouth and utter a simple, "How?"

Petra looked downcast, painfully recalling the memory as tears once again welled up in her eyes, "It wasn't long after we all moved here... she- she still tried to take care of all of us. But- But she got sick..." she stutteringly trailed off, a hand covering her mouth at the memory. "We didn't have enough money to help her. She got worse and worse... I still remember when we brought her food and water... she would just be lying on the bed almost paralyzed and when she spoke her voice was always so raspy and tired, barely even able to say any words at all..."

As Subaru fell to his knees, broken at the fact of knowing such a terrible fate befell someone like Frederica. When he fell, Beatrice broke her hand away from his and ran over to Petra on her own. The little Great Spirit took her old friend's hands in hers, looking up at the taller girl with big worried eyes.

Petra knelt down and quickly wrapped Beatrice in a tight embrace. Beatrice returned it, her own eyes downcast as she let Petra cry on her shoulder. The Great Spirit even did her best to rub small circles on her old friend's back, like her contractor had done before, to try and soothe her.

Pandora knelt beside Subaru and, similarly, gave him a hug. He didn't return it, but that was okay. He was dazed, grieving over and comprehending the loss of a loved one within his mind. She couldn't understand what that felt like, but if he needed his own time then she would accept that. The former Witch just kept hugging him, making sure that he knew she would always be there for him.

People around them started to stare at the scene they were making. Beatrice and Pandora's respective glares, though the latter's was under a hood, had been more than enough to drive most onlookers away, the rest choosing to ignore them and go about their business.

It ended up being a little while before Petra was able to get ahold of herself. She took deep breaths, doing her best to calm down whilst Beatrice kept doing her best to help. When Petra finally pulled away from their embrace, Beatrice raised her hands and helped wipe away some of the girl's tears. At that, Petra smiled and hugged Beatrice again; this time, it was out of sincere gratitude, appreciating all that Beatrice was trying to do for her.

Subaru, however, was a little different. When he fully came out of his daze, his head tilted upward. Pandora pulled away, coming face-to-face with him. Despite both of their hoods being on, they felt as though they could see one other perfectly fine.

Their foreheads gently pressed together, Subaru's breath hitching while his thoughts went haywire. His grip on her hand periodically squeezed as certain thoughts plagued his mind, her thumb lightly gracing the back of his hand to help relax him.

His mouth opened, his head slightly shaking against hers, "Dora, I... I did this."

She pulled her head away from his, choosing to look at him more directly, as her free hand came to his cheek with an affectionate, gently touch, "That is not true."

His head shook again, denying it, "It is- It is," he repeated. "If I hadn't made my decision, she wouldn't have- *they* wouldn't have..."

Her thumb graced his cheek, rubbing it back and forth, "Stop blaming yourself for things that are not, and were never, your fault." She paused, her head tilting down as it shook, "It is mine. I am the one that must atone, not you."

He wanted to deny it, to say anything that would put the blame back on himself; yet, his subconscious knew that he shouldn't. Despite how much he wanted to shoulder the blame, to keep Pandora from holding everything on herself, he couldn't. He knew that wasn't what she wanted him to do.

They all stood again, slightly more composed and stable. Subaru held Pandora's hand tightly, as if she'd suddenly, very possibly, disappear from his grasp. Petra held Beatrice's hand, her tears mostly all gone despite how much she continued to sniffle.

The older girl looked at them all, "I'm sorry, it's just... that topic is still a little rough for us," she chuckled a little to herself, to try and ease her inner tension. "We tried to raise enough money to help her by doing small jobs... whatever we could do that would earn us money, really," she shook her head, "but it wasn't enough. She died before we could get enough, but she always kept smiling at us and telling us about how proud she was."

Tears threatened to fall again as she remembered those moments. Every time she went into the former maid's room, met with a tired but proud smile. The former beast maid would always tell her and the others that she was proud, happy with all of them. The guilt from not being able to save her always ate Petra from within. It made her feel like a failure, inadequate and undeserving of her sister figure's praise.

Subaru looked at Petra, immediately recognizing the look she had on her face, his breaths heavy and eyes soft. "Petra," he called out, his voice rough yet clear. She turned to him, giving him full view of how sad she truly was, "It wasn't your fault." He knew how ironic it was to say that; how hypocritical it was for him to even think of suggesting it, but he couldn't help it. It just felt right to say.

By the looks of things, it seemed as though it was something Petra needed to hear. Her saddened expression faltered, shifting into different ones in the span of seconds.

Subaru wasn't done, though, "By the sound of things, I have no doubt that, even in her last moments, she was truly happy and proud of you. I know that she wouldn't want you to blame yourself; she wouldn't want you to hurt yourself over this." He took a breath, "You're amazing, Petra. She knew that... and I think it's time that you knew that, too."

It was definitely something she needed to hear. She tilted her head down, vigorously wiping her eyes with her sleeve before she looked back up at him. She nodded slowly, "Thanks, Subaru," she momentarily let a small smile come to her face. "I needed that."

When she smiled, he found something within himself that made him smile too. He nodded back, "You're welcome."

Petra's smile faded as she took another staggering breath, "I've felt so alone for a while now," she sadly admitted. "It's just been me and Louise for a few years, still struggling to make ends meet so we can try and live our lives somewhat normally." She shook her head, looking up to Subaru with tearful eyes once more. She raised her arm in a dramatic gesture, "Now both Garfiel and Meili are off fighting in some stupid war, I don't know if I'll ever see them again- I just..."

Beatrice tightly hugged Petra's leg, something which helped the older girl calm down again. She appreciated the Great Spirit's action, headpatting her to show it. Subaru was about to say something, but immediately cut himself off as another thought occupied his mind. Stuttering, he asked, "W-Wait, did you just say they're fighting in a war?"

Petra momentarily froze, looking back up at Subaru, "You don't..." she paused, taking a moment to think to herself. She slumped down a bit, "Right, I forgot that you haven't been here that long," she whispered to herself quietly, all while Subaru uneasily waited for her response. Shakily, she told him, "Lugnica has been at war with Vollachia for the last decade."

That made Subaru's mind short circuit, his body shivering. Unconsciously, he muttered, "...What?"

Luckily, Pandora tightened her hold on him and brought him back to his senses. She leant close to him, whispering so nobody could overhear, "It is okay, it is not your fault." She repeated it a few more times until he was able to ease himself back into the moment.

Subaru gathered his bearings, choosing not to focus on that detail but rather focus on another. He cleared his mind, deciding not to dwell on his own problems. Instead, he'd help with Petra's. He voiced, "Petra... you won't be alone anymore, I promise."

Her eyes shifted from sadness into something more hopeful. She tilted her head, as if questioning the legitimacy of such a statement. "R-Really?" she stuttered.

"Really," a voice spoke from below, prompting her to tilt her head down. Beatrice looked up at her with regretful eyes, "Betty has made mistakes over the last ten years. Betty wishes to start amending them, just as the former Witch does, I suppose."

Petra blinked once, then twice, before more tears welled up in her eyes again. She crouched down and wrapped Beatrice in another hug. This wasn't because she was sad, but because she was incredibly happy, overjoyed even.

She held Beatrice a little tighter, uttering a simple yet very emotional, "Thank you."

Beatrice lightly hugged back, but Petra pulled away before too long. She had a small smile on her face, in contrast the frown she previously had. Beatrice returned it, butterflies fluttering within her stomach for reasons she didn't understand. Though, she knew that a large part of her really enjoyed seeing Petra, her old friend, smile so genuinely once again.

She stood up, finally fully composed and much more self-confident. She'd seen the light; a new hope rose through her dark life and she was going to make sure that it didn't fade. She looked over at Subaru, putting a hand behind her head and scratching it awkwardly, "I'm sorry again for being so... emotional," she lightly chuckled again.

Subaru smiled at seeing her smile. Right now, she seemed so carefree. It was like a remnant of her past self returned in this instance, and he was glad to have it back.

"You don't need to apologize, you brat!" Beatrice had been the one to say that, grumpily staring up at Petra. "I believe my contractor already told you this already, Betty shouldn't have to repeat it, in fact." Subaru wholeheartedly agreed with his contracted spirit, truly not minding Petra's emotional instability. He understood why she was like that at its core, and it wasn't like he was much better himself.

Petra actually laughed at Beatrice's antics, looking down at the Great Spirit apologetically, "I'm so-" she stopped herself, her eyes and facial expression softening as she put different words together, "I'll try to do better, I promise."

"Hmph! Betty expects nothing less, I suppose."

Subaru smiled at the display, genuinely glad that both Beatrice and Petra were able to bond during such a... depressing time. He looked to his side, noticing that Pandora was currently looking at him. Her mouth curved into a smile, meant only for him. They both simultaneously squeezed their hands against the other's in a show of love, care and appreciation.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Subaru. He turned his head toward Petra again, "If I can ask, where were Roswaal and some of the others during all of this?"

Petra directed her gaze to him, her expression turning into more of a thoughtful one, "I'm not too sure, honestly. I think they left just after we did, because when I tried to return to the mansion for help it was completely abandoned." She looked down at Beatrice, "I know why you weren't there now," her gaze picked back up to Subaru, "but I don't know where Roswaal, Rem, Ram and Emilia went."

Subaru hummed to himself, thinking. It was weird that they've been considered 'under the radar' for so long. It didn't even seem as though any of them went to the Capital for anything, either.

He could understand why, though. If any of them were too emotional, they probably didn't want to go somewhere that was actively memorializing him. Though, in that instance, what's the case for Roswaal? No way, as the acting Court Mage, would he just disappear, even if he was 'grieving' over his loss or something.

He stopped thinking about it, snapping out of his thoughts and refocusing his eyes on Petra. "Do you know about anyone else? Anyone we could maybe meet today?" he asked.

Petra shook her head, "Only Louise, since we're still roommates. Garfiel and Meili are away, and Otto-san is still out on a trip... though, when he gets back, you should really see him."

Subaru smiled, closing his eyes to imagine meeting them all again. It felt nice. He couldn't help but ask, "How's the old merchant doing, anyway? You said before that he drinks more now?"

"He's... well, he could be doing better," Petra answered honestly, putting a finger to her chin. "Yeah, he drinks a lot more than he used to. It's mostly because he's sad all the time. Though, despite how sad he is, he's usually happy when he's with all of us. But, the last time that happened was a long time ago. But, when he's here, I still take time to make fun of his new hair!"

As Petra spoke, Subaru started to feel bad for his old merchant friend. But, when Petra started to talk about some sort of new hair, his curiosity piqued, "New hair? What kind of new hair?"

Petra laughed just by remembering it, "He has a weird, uh... thing with his hair, where it's receded back? Like, the hairline here," she pointed at her own head for reference, "is a~ll the way back here. It looks really funny."

Subaru tried to imagine it in his head, coming up with various different versions of what it could possibly look like. The possibilities made him laugh, but he shook his head to help refocus himself. "I can't wait to see that for myself," he commented.

Petra laughed, "Neither can I." She took a breath, "If you want, I can take you to Louise after her shift ends. She works at a pretty busy restaurant not too far away and, even though she'd probably have no problem with it, I don't think it would be right to take her away from work."

Subaru nodded in understanding. From there, it was mutually decided between the four of them to just simply wait out the time. There wasn't much else to do, anyway, and just exploring the Capital and enjoying the company of one another genuinely sounded nice.

The four of them proceeded to walk through the streets of the Capital, talking about anything that came to mind. As it turned out, ten years really changes a lot of things. Petra was more than happy to talk about how things generally were, sharing knowledge of certain districts and plazas she typically enjoyed going to.

Subaru even had one funny encounter with someone he never thought to see again, "How are you still selling appas..."

"Heh? Got a problem with it?" his face contorted into an expression of annoyance, his arms crossed to show his displeasure. "Say, you talk like we've met before or somethin'. Have we?"

As Subaru stammered, Petra popped in from beside him, "Hiya, Risch-san! How goes business?"

At the sight of Petra, the man actually smiled, "Ah, little Petra. Business is goin' fine, actually. I just signed my fifth business deal with another restaurant a couple days ago."

"Ah, that's good to hear!" Petra exclaimed. "I'm showing my friends around today, so we should get going. It was nice to see you again!"

As she waved goodbye, starting to lead the group away, the Appa Salesman waved back with a smile, "No problem there, little Petra. Come back and buy an appa sometime soon!"

As the four of them made more distance away, Subaru turned and asked, "You know him?"

Petra's hands coupled behind her back as she leaned forward with a smile, "Yup! We usually bought food from him, since he was so cheap back then. Now he's got a bunch of business deals with restaurants, so he provides some supply for them."

Huh, who knew. Subaru found it a bit bizarre that, after all this time, he'd run into that man again. Subaru was honestly glad that the Appa Salesman was doing well for himself.

He turned his head to the side, looking at Pandora... who was looking at him. That smug smile on her face gave away what the rest of her expression was like. She was teasing him. She smugly asked, "How did you like meeting with your *old friend*~?"

He half-heartedly narrowed his eyes at her, "Shush. Just because I had to look at his face after so many... setbacks, doesn't make him my friend."

"You still looked at his face a lot. It must have gotten tiring for you, then?"

"I'd rather look at his face than have to look at a wall," he commented. If he was being honest, looking at the Appa Salesman after dying was probably better than a few other circumstances.

"Now you have my face to look at!"

"Is that really better, though?"

She pouted, "Are you comparing me to a wall?"

"Worse."

She feigned a shocked gasp, "Why would that be?"

She glanced at her, a smug smile on his face, "At least a wall doesn't coerce and tease me for compliments."

She faltered for a moment, pouting again, "Rude. Is it so bad to just want you, my beloved, to dote on me?"

Subaru did his best to stifle a laugh, "No, no, of course not. You know that I'd dote on you... anytime..."

He trailed off, his eyes falling off track and gluing themselves onto something else. He slowly stopped walking, neither his head or his eyes moving themselves from their fixed position.

Pandora's eyes faltered, looking at him in both a confused and concerned manner. She followed his gaze to a building, then inside the building until she saw something, or rather someone, in particular. She blinked in realization as Petra and Beatrice, who were slightly ahead of them, realized that the duo had stopped and started to come back.

Beatrice was the first to speak when she got close enough, looking up at her contractor concerningly — despite her facial expression looking more annoyed than not, "What are you doing, I wonder?"

Petra stopped herself from asking anything verbally, instead looking at both him and Pandora with a hint of wonderment. She ended up following his gaze, too, before also realizing what he was looking at. Beatrice, ever so small, was the last to figure it out.

Pandora was the first to give Subaru encouragement, "You should go in and talk to him." He finally broke off his gaze, looking at her strangely. "It may help you find some more closure," she continued.

Subaru considered it, his eyes breaking away from her as he thought. He turned his head to Petra, then Beatrice, with them both nodding in separate agreement and support. That allowed him to make his decision.

"Maybe you guys should stay out here for this," he suggested, separating his hand from Pandora's and activating Third Shift.

Pandora understood, "Good luck. We will be right out here if you need us."

Subaru only nodded, turning his back to them, taking a deep breath and, as calmly as possible, walking into the building before him. That left the three girls outside alone, awkwardly standing there with nothing to say or do.

Petra coughed into her hand, "So, uh..." she tried to start a topic, looking over at Pandora in particular as she began, "how did you and Subaru start liking each other, exactly?"

Beatrice perked up, looking at Petra with wide eyes, "N-No, don't get her started on that, I suppose!"

"Why not?" Petra looked down confusedly at Beatrice. "You guys told me the 'bare minimum' of what went down, so I wanna know the details!" she looked back up at Pandora, more giddy and excited. It was like the childish part of her came back out. "So~ tell me! How'd it happen! How'd Subaru turn you into such a lovey-dovey girlfriend!"

Pandora looked at Petra, blinking in surprise as she registered the girl's question. As she came to a conclusion, a teasing smirk graced her face while her eyes tracked to Beatrice. When that happened, Beatrice knew what was coming next.

In absolute despair, the Great Spirit fell to her knees, "NOOOOOO!"

Thus, Pandora opened her mouth and began...

When Subaru entered the building, he didn't expect it to be as worn down as it was. That wasn't to say it was in bad management, the place just seemed to be more of an older building. The fact that there were so many patrons meant that the place was in good business, which may have been why renovations weren't being done.

Subaru wasn't too worried about that, however. Instead, he made his way toward the bar, calmly and slowly walking toward one specific man; one that sat alone, a drink in hand.

Before Subaru could continue pressing forward, a hand suddenly grasped his shoulder. When he looked to see who it was, he was met with the sight of a normal, scruffy looking, drunken man. The man looked at him with a strange and drunken expression.

"I'd be careful if I was you," the man spoke, his voice hoarse and cracked. The man didn't speak again for another few seconds, taking the time to get as many burps out as

possible. When he finally did talk to Subaru again, he warned, "That feller is real aggressive."

Subaru blinked, realizing that this man must've noticed how focused he was on this particular individual. Subaru made an effort to shift his head back over to the lone man, making it just in time to watch him take another chug of his drink.

Subaru brushed the man's hand off, "I'll take my chances."

As he started to move forward, he heard the man burp a few more times and comment, "It's your funeral." It hardly bothered Subaru, though, as he finally made it to the man in question. He took a seat on one of the stools, his legs positioning themselves under the bar whilst he made himself more comfortable.

Subaru noted that the man took notice of him, his yellow eyes momentarily shifting to glance at him before they landed back on the drink in his hand. He took another chug, emptying his glass before setting it back on the table.

"Do you want anything?" the man asked, his voice low and deep. To Subaru, it was further indication of what the man truly was feeling.

"Just water, if you don't mind," Subaru answered simply.

The answer did cause a reaction, making the man both confused and a little more upset. Despite that, he obliged the request. He called the bartender over and promptly ordered both a water and a new drink for himself.

They were both silent, even as the bartender gave them their drinks. Subaru took a sip of his water, whilst the man beside him wasted no time in gulping down his. Subaru only kept his eyes on his water, fiddling with the glass using his fingers, "So, why is the 'Finest of Knights' here, in a bar, drowning out his sorrows?"

The man laughed, but it was more of a mocking laugh than anything. He set the glass back onto the bar rather roughly, the sound of it slamming onto its surface being rather loud, as he kept his eyes down, "Nobody has called me that for a long, long time."

Subaru's eyes softened, hearing the depressive tone in the man's voice. This was very unlike his old friend, Julius Juukulius. There were bags under his eyes, indicating that he hadn't been sleeping well. His usual neat, gleaming violet hair was an absolute mess as it spiraled in various different directions. It was dirty, as were his clothes, the stubble on his chin and even his skin. He could only wonder what led his old friend into such a state.

"I'm sure it still applies, though," Subaru commented, somewhat pushing Julius' old title back onto him.

He shook his head, "Not anymore."

"Why's that?" Subaru took another sip of his water, eyes shifting to the side while his head remained forward.

Julius stayed silent for a little while, as if contemplating the question and how to answer it. "I failed as a knight. I failed as a sponsor to my lady. And..." he paused, taking in a sad breath, "before all of that, I failed as a friend."

Subaru gave small nods to convey his understanding, despite the two not directly facing one another. He truly did understand what Julius was feeling, since... well, a good portion of those feelings were still running through him right now.

Subaru let himself take one full breath, in and out, before he spoke again, "And how did you do that?"

Julius actually, very slightly, turned his head toward Subaru after that inquiry, "Have you been living under some sort of rock, all these years?"

Subaru tilted his head to the side once before leveling again, nodding a little. It wasn't like the question *wasn't* directly on-point, but, "More like I was living *in* a rock, so I've missed a lot."

Despite his blatant confusion, Julius just stared at his hooded form for a while. Then he scoffed, turning his head away with a few shakes. He grabbed his drink, taking the glass to his mouth and taking in a large gulp. When he slammed it back down onto the bar, he said, "How could I have *not* failed?"

He scoffed again, shaking his head and clenching his hands. Subaru was afraid that he might even break the glass he was holding, but, luckily, he didn't. Julius seemed to calm himself down after a few moments, continuing to stare down at his drink with a narrowed glare.

"My lady... Anastasia-sama, she... she died due to her poor health and I couldn't do anything to help her!" the more he spoke, the more agitated he became. Subaru was willing to bet that he was on the edge of lashing out more physically at any moment.

Though, Subaru understood why. Despite the neutral expression he adopted from under his hood, his posture clearly slumped as the news of Anastasia's fate settled in his mind. Suddenly, a lot of things regarding Julius's current state and condition made a lot more sense.

He and Anastasia were never close, so Subaru couldn't necessarily put his heart out to her as much as Julius could, but he did feel genuinely bad for her. He was sure that she didn't deserve to perish that way, and he knew just how much she meant to Julius. Subaru understood that, without Anastasia around, his old friend probably felt aimless and lost without a purpose.

Subaru could connect with that mindset and line of thinking. He knew that, in the past, if Emilia had ever been permanently killed, he wouldn't have known what to do with himself. He even felt that way when Rem first fell into her 'sleeping beauty' sleep. But, he got up and kept going. He kept telling himself that wallowing in his own failure would be the opposite of what Rem would have wanted from him. It helped motivate him.

Subaru took another sip of water, not going unnoticed by Julius. The former knight glanced at him again, "Are you going to say anything? Aren't you going to say 'sorry for your loss'?"

It was then he realized that he hadn't said anything in a while. But, even so, Subaru took his time to consider what words to use. By the comment Julius made, saying that line was out of the question. He had no doubt that many, many people have said that to him in the past.

Well, he wasn't here to pity the former knight too much, anyway. Subaru set his glass back down onto the table, keeping his eyes settled on it without a single falter, "Is this what she'd want you to do?"

That question seemed to make Julius falter, though. It caught him off guard, which was what Subaru wanted. By the way things seemed, Julius hadn't had that line said to him before. The former knight eyed him in a way Subaru couldn't identify, "Excuse me, but what are you talking about?"

"You heard me," Subaru said. He remained assertive, feeling as though it was the wisest choice in order to get his point across. "Would she, Anastasia-sama, want you to come here and drink every day instead of actually doing something with your life?"

In an instant, with a very sudden show of aggression, Julius pivoted himself in his seat and grabbed Subaru by his collar. He reeled his other arm back, enclosed into a fist preparing to deliver a blow directly to Subaru's face. The action drew a few eyes, but neither of them paid the sudden onlookers any mind.

The two were now face-to-face, with Subaru now able to see Julius' full expression. Subaru remained unflinching, simply looking at Julius with a neutral, yet pitiful, gaze from under his hood. He genuinely felt bad for Julius and seeing how broken, sad and genuinely destroyed he seemed in this moment actually hurt Subaru.

"Don't-" he stuttered, his voice agitated and shaky, mimicking his fist. "Don't act like you knew her."

"But you did."

The unhesitating statement surprised Julius, making him falter again. His eyes traced the hooded Subaru uncertainly, his voice still shaking as he tried to form words, "W-What did you just say?"

"I said: you did," Subaru repeated, unwavering in his stance. He kept going, "You were her knight, her sponsor, her closest confidant. If anyone knew her, *still* knows her, it's you."

Julius's head tilted away, his eyes moving off of him and toward the ground while his hand slowly let go of Subaru's collar. When his grip released, Subaru only bothered to quickly readjust his robe before turning back to his glass of water.

Julius took a few moments to himself, fully taking in Subaru's words as he slowly turned himself back toward his own glass. They were both silent, with Subaru taking another sip of his water as he simply waited.

Julius looked down, his fingers meshed together as he contemplated everything in his life up until this very point. Subaru took another sip of his water, watching from the corner of his eye while Julius used one hand to slowly push his glass away.

"Have you come to a consensus?" Subaru inquired, his tone a bit high as he watched Julius' hand retract.

Julius didn't do anything for a few seconds, but shook his head in uncertainty. "No, I haven't," he confessed, his head still hung down low. "Even if... Even if she wouldn't want me doing this, how does this change anything?"

Subaru turned his head a little to the side, getting a better look at Julius' form. His expression was more downcast than not and, while he previously pushed his drink away, his eyes still looked at the glass before him with a sense of longing.

Julius continued after a moment of pause, "I still failed as a friend and a knight..." he trailed off, his voice lined with immense guilt as he recalled memories of the past. "I was supposed to protect them, my lady and my friend... yet I allowed them both to die."

Oh, no. Everyone thought that he was dead. Subaru felt a plethora of different things, his face failing to remain indifferent. He suddenly felt even guiltier, realizing that people didn't just mourn his loss but his supposed *death*, as well.

He looked at Julius with a new form of contemplation. He initially hadn't wanted to reveal himself to his old friend, selfishly not wanting to hear the same questions he'd gotten from Petra all over again. But, now, after realizing just how bad things were, he had a sudden change of mind.

Subaru's gaze softened, his hand reaching behind his head and grabbing hold of the hood. He didn't pull it down right away, mainly out of hesitation, but he took a deep breath, remembering everyone and what they've all been going through, and finally unveiled his face.

Julius saw the action out of the corner of his eye, turning his head to get a better look. What he saw made him instinctively reel back, feeling as though a ghost had just appeared in front of him. The former Finest Knight's breath hitched, becoming more rapid, as he looked at Subaru's face in bewilderment and confusion.

"Hey, Julius. It's been a-

In a reaction he didn't expect, Julius lunged forward and essentially tackled him to the bar. Subaru's head hit the surface of it, the hood, which lay loose behind his head, cushioning most of the impact. Julius' eyes looked at him in a way that promised certain death, prompting Subaru to gulp in sudden fear.

"How *dare* you use his face, imposter!" he yelled, clearly hostile and ready to kill him without an ounce of hesitation. The outburst drew people's eyes again, but luckily Julius was blocking his face so that others couldn't clearly see it.

Subaru tried his best to think and respond fast, "It's... It's really me, Julius!"

His eyes narrowed, unwilling to believe him. But, as luck would have it, Julius said, "I will humor you, imposter. If you tell me *one* thing that only the real Subaru knows, I will 'believe' you."

One thing? That was almost too easy.

Subaru opened his mouth quickly, "I... I embarrassed myself at the... Royal Selection, calling myself Emilia's knight in front of everyone!"

Julius' eyes widened, his grip on Subaru loosening ever so slightly. Though, he kept going:

"After that we took on the White Whale and Sloth. We defeated him together, he tried to possess me. I hated you at the time because I was jealous of-"

"E-Enough, enough..." he stumbled back, completely letting go of Subaru in an instant.

Subaru quickly flipped his hood back on, covering his face so that none of the other patrons could see. Julius could only stand there, totally shell shocked; Subaru even had to help him sit down.

When Julius' butt finally hit his seat, he gave Subaru an incredulous look, "I- I don't understand... How are you here? I thought that you-"

"Died? Yeah, I've realized that everyone seems to think that these days," Subaru interrupted with a sigh. He could see Julius starting to open his mouth to ask another question, but, before he could, Subaru interjected again, "Before you even ask, I was never dead in the first place. I was stuck in that seal we found, all that time ago."

Julius seemed to process that information, faltering with an agape mouth, "That was not what Reinhard said when he came back."

"There must've been a miscommunication somewhere..." Subaru pondered to himself, remembering what Petra had said earlier. If she was the one that spoke with Reinhard, then chances are she said something similar to, "He's gone," and Reinhard took that as, "He's dead."

Julius could only nod, still in absolute disbelief at what was happening. Despite that, the man still found his words, "I'm so, so sorry."

Subaru looked at him questioningly, wondering why the former Finest Knight would make such an absurd statement, "For what?"

"For failing. I... I let you get taken by that... that... *Witch*," he seethed, clearly angry at both himself and Pandora.

He wisely decided not to address the last part of Julius' statement, instead putting his focus on making sure that Julius knew one fact, "Dude, it wasn't your fault. Not even close."

As Subaru shook his head, denying such an accusation, Julius' eyes looked at him in a pleading manner, "How?! How is it not my fault, that we- I couldn't prevent you from befalling the fate bestowed upon you!"

Subaru only smiled, knowing the answer to that in an instant, "Think about it for a moment, man," he started, confident in his words. "You were up against a literal reality warping Witch, someone that took the Sword Saint and effortlessly put him somewhere else. In a direct confrontation, it would've been a lot worse. I can't, or never would, expect you to lay down your life for mine, especially when up against something like that."

It was true. If Julius and the others tried to fight the old Pandora directly, they likely would've died. They were all immensely lucky to have been discarded the way they were, since Pandora, at the time, was only focused on him and didn't want to unnecessarily fight anyone. Otherwise he had no doubt that Pandora would've killed them all, besides Reinhard.

Julius looked at him with a narrowed, half-hearted glare, "That's hypocritical of you." Subaru was shocked to hear that. It was the first time someone actually verbally called him out on this so directly. "You say that we shouldn't lay down our lives for you, yet you sacrifice yourself for us. As a friend, I don't think that is fair."

Subaru understood Julius' words, thinking to himself before saying, "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if one of my friends died, especially when I could've done something about it."

"That is exactly how we felt," Julius told him in a low, saddened voice. Subaru didn't know what to say. The contexts of their statements were entirely different, yet the feelings they carried remained the same.

He shook his head, choosing to insist his point, "There was nothing you could've done."

Julius stayed quiet for a bit, thinking to himself. Then, reluctantly, he gave a single nod, "Maybe you're right. But I could've at least tried..."

It was then that Subaru realized the topic had shifted. No longer was this about his situation, but more of a personal one to Julius himself. Subaru's eyes stayed on him, putting a hand on his shoulder to help encourage him, "Remember what I told you before."

Julius looked back into Subaru's eyes, or at least where he thought they generally were. He silently thought about it, his gaze peering away once he remembered. He muttered, "It's not what she would want." He took in a deep breath through his nose, preparing to continue, "She wouldn't want me to be depressed, but to continue doing the best I can."

Subaru nodded, "That's right." He leant his head forward in an attempt to emphasize his next point a little more, "You didn't fail anyone, you got that man? Not me, not her, not your knighthood... nobody, nothing. You did the best you could and that's what counts, alright?"

Subaru's hand left Julius' shoulder, his posture leaning back as he gave his old friend some extra space. It seemed as though his words really did affect him, as the former Finest Knight's expression continuously shifted based on his constantly changing emotions.

He was silent for a while, his eyes looking anywhere but at Subaru as he thought about something privately. Then, suddenly, he lunged forward again... but this time, his arms enveloped around Subaru in a genuine hug.

"I am truly glad that you are back, my friend," he uttered, almost in a whisper. Subaru was mentally taken aback at the statement, but, as one would have it, a small smile made its way onto his face while a single arm reciprocated the embrace.

"It's good to be back," he muttered back, sincerely happy at the development.

They stayed like that for only a few more seconds, separating not too long after to face one another more directly. Julius looked at him, his eyes telling Subaru everything that was on his mind, "... I still can't believe that you're really in front of me, right now. I have so many questions," he muttered, his voice shaky and still massively uncertain.

Subaru nodded, "I know."

"I assume you wear the hood for a reason?" Julius inquired.

"I'd rather not expose my identity to everyone, especially since there seems to be literal statues of me around everywhere."

Julius only nodded, averting his gaze. He must've thought, or realized, that it was a stupid question to ask. Subaru mentally sighed, thinking to himself on what to do next. He didn't want to leave Julius here to fend for himself, especially after what just happened, but there were also things that he still needed to do.

Subaru continued to think, wondering what he could do next. They were all supposed to go see Louise later when her shift ends, but that would likely take a while. He was sure that Pandora probably wouldn't mind staying a few days in the Capital, but Beatrice... yeah, she would probably want to leave as soon as possible.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. He looked at Julius thoughtfully, "Hey, Julius. Is it possible for you to do something for me?"

Julius immediately perked up, "Y-Yes, of course. What is it you need?"

Subaru fiddled with the sleeve of his robe nervously, "I know that this might be an impossible thing to ask, but is it possible for you to get us an audience with Queen Felt?"

Julius could really only blink.

"...we shared our connection with the stars. This is actually one of the most important subjects for us, due to our mutual connection and interest. In fact, we both decided that we would name our kids with this in mind."

Beatrice groaned as Pandora droned on and on about her relationship with Subaru. Quite frankly, it was something she had no interest in learning about. Petra, however, seemed completely enthralled in the stories being told, sitting, quite literally, on the edge of her seat as Pandora spoke of their mutual interests.

"Woah, really? What names did you guys decide on?"

Pandora smiled, genuinely quite happy that someone supported them so much, and so openly too, "We decided on a plethora of names, though we have not actually decided on which order to apply them. Would you like to hear some?"

"Yes, please!"

"Very well. Luna, Sol, Star, Sun, Moon, Aurora and Kainat."

"Woah. Those are pretty good," Petra complimented. "Don't some of those mean the same thing, though?"

"I do not see that as a problem," Pandora closed her eyes, stating it as a fact. "Perhaps their similar meanings would help them connect, in the future."

Petra nodded vigorously, "I get it, I get it!" She put a finger to her chin, "Do you have any more?"

Pandora gave one nod, "I do. We have Naoko and Kenichi, to honor Baru's parents. Apart from those, I believe it would be best to keep them to myself for now."

Petra seemed a little downcast at the statement, beginning to audibly whine, "Aww..."

It was then that the door opened, out coming Subaru with Julius following close behind him. Beatrice looked up from her spot, having been in the fetal position hugging her knees, her face seemingly starting to brighten into a glow as she saw Subaru.

"Thank you, I suppose!" she exclaimed happily, jumping up and running over to give Subaru, her savior, a hug out of pure thankfulness.

Despite his confusion, he used one arm to pat her head. He looked down at her, an eyebrow raised, "You're welcome? What was going on, here?"

Beatrice looked up at him, her only visible eye being wide and pleading, "So many stories... I suppose."

That didn't really help satiate Subaru's curiosity, so he looked at the other two girls for answers. Surprisingly, they were sitting across from one another with rather happy smiles on their faces. Subaru concluded that they must've been having a nice conversation.

"I'm glad you two have been getting along," he commented, truly happy to know that they were actually connecting with one another. A part of him feared that they'd be hostile with each other the whole time, but it seemed as though Petra was completely willing to trust him and Pandora; she even went as far as to start opening up to the former Witch, it seemed.

Petra smiled, "It's been a pleasure!" She stood up in a flash, ready to keep moving, until her eyes landed on the rather scruffy looking Julius. He still stood next to Subaru, rather awkwardly at that, not quite sure of what to do with himself, "So, what's he doing here?"

Subaru followed her gaze, his eyes also landing on Julius, "Ah, right. I don't think you guys have actually met before." He moved himself between them, gesturing to Julius first, "Petra, this is Julius. He's a friend of mine." He then gestures to Petra, "Julius, this is Petra. She's one of the best people I know."

Julius put a hand over his heart and gave a small bow, doing his best to give a professional greeting, "It is very nice to meet you, Petra-san."

She nodded, very upbeat and informal compared to Julius, "Same for you, Julius-san!"

Julius uprighted himself, looking around at everyone else in the group. "Great Spirit Beatrice," he recognized her, doing another short bow in yet another polite greeting. Then, his eyes shifted to the last member of their little group, "My apologies, but I don't seem to recognize you. What might be your name?"

Luckily, Subaru thought of an alibi, "This is... Panda! Yeah, uh... she's a demi-human and a bit shy, so we gave her an extra robe to help her a little bit in public."

While his delivery could've used some work, it seemed as though Julius bought it. The former Finest Knight smiled, doing yet another short bow, "I understand. I do hope that we can get along, even if you do not wish to directly speak to me."

Pandora only gave one, slow nod in response. Her outer demeanor changed, doing a complete flip, as she became a little more fidgety and reluctant. To Subaru, it seemed as though she began doing her best to fill the role that had been forced upon her.

When he looked at Beatrice, she had a palm to her face. Then when he looked at Petra, she seemed both baffled and amused. It confused Subaru, unsure as to why they'd both have such a-

...Oh, now he realized it. It was the name, wasn't it? After thinking about it, 'Panda' was probably one of the worst names he could've used. It sounded too similar to 'Pandora' on its own. How Julius didn't realize was the baffling part. Maybe it was because he'd had a little too much to drink. Well, it didn't really matter; as long as he didn't figure it out, then everything was fine.

Petra buried her amusement, looking at Subaru expectantly, "You still didn't answer my question."

Question? What quest- oh, "Ah, right," he cleared his throat, "Julius here agreed to help us talk to Felt."

Petra's eyes almost exploded out of their sockets, "T-T-The Q-Queen?!"

Subaru couldn't help but smile at the overreaction; as expected of Petra. "I almost forgot that you don't actually know too much about her," he chuckled to himself, somewhat amused at his own forgetfulness. "Felt's an old friend. I'm sure she'll be pretty happy to see me and know that I'm actually okay."

Beatrice shook her head, "If by happy you mean that she will erupt into a fit of tears, hug your waist and ask if you're real, then you'd be correct, I suppose."

Subaru blinked funnily at his contracted spirit. She probably wasn't wrong, but it was a little funny to think about how easily she said that. Petra finally stopped shaking in her own shock, refocusing on the conversation just as Julius decided to speak up.

"I do believe that they will let us in if I request an audience," he simply clarified.

Petra looked at Subaru, a little confused, tilting her head as she questioned him, "Weren't we going to see Louise today?"

Subaru looked at her, a small essence of guilt rising within his chest. He really, *really* wanted to see Louise, but he had an opportunity to do what they needed to do, as well. As much as he wanted to see his surrogate daughter again, he also needed to focus on the overarching goal.

"I was thinking that we could actually do that tomorrow," he started nervously, beginning to explain his revised plan. "We can meet up in the morning sometime, before you both go to work, and I can see her then. If that's okay with you, of course."

His nerves steadily dissipated right when he saw the girl visibly light up, smiling excitedly at him, "That's perfect! I know she's probably really tired from work today, so that'll give her plenty of time to rest! I'll make sure she's ready tomorrow morning, and I'll keep you being here a surprise!"

Beatrice looked at Petra weirdly, "You speak as if you are leaving right now, in fact. Are you not coming with us to the palace, I wonder?"

Petra calmed down, smiling down at Beatrice, "Nah, I don't think I'm really suited for that." She gazed up into the sky, almost dreamily, "Though, it would be so *cool* to be in *the* Royal Palace and meet the Queen."

Beatrice looked a little dejected at the statement, which did not go unnoticed by Subaru. He silently began pondering the possible reasons for his contracted spirit to act this way. It didn't take him too long to figure it out, though.

It was obvious that Beatrice missed Petra. Whether the Great Spirit wanted to admit it or not, her emotions were true and absolute. Subaru had no doubt that she just wanted to spend more time with her old friend, having not seen her for over a decade.

Oh, how Subaru could remember when Beatrice and Petra got along back then... It was nice seeing them like that. He'd be happy for them to reconnect with one another.

"You know, Beako, you can go with her if you want," he suddenly suggested, prompting her to immediately pick her head up and look at him as if he'd gone mad.

"W-What, I suppose?" she stuttered, surprised to have heard him say such a thing. Her eyes quickly shifted to Pandora, then back to him, "Are you sure that you will be okay without Betty, I wonder?"

He smiled down at her, giving her head a nice pat to help encourage her, "We'll be fine, I promise. Go spend some time with Petra."

Beatrice's only visible eye lit up, very happy at the notion and encouragement. Petra looked at Beatrice, a smile still on her face. "Are you sure you want to come with me, Beatrice? You don't have to," Petra asked, her tone a bit low at the possibility of Beatrice not wanting to join her.

Beatrice quickly snapped her head back toward her, "Betty will come, I suppose!" She then ran to Petra's side, very happy to have the opportunity to spend time with her old friend again. Although she was worried about Subaru, she trusted him... and, reluctantly, Pandora too. She would see them in the morning, anyway, and she was confident that they'd be able to handle anything that might attempt to harm them.

Petra chuckled, both happy with the outcome and amused by the Great Spirit's antics. "Alright then," she started, looking at Subaru as she began to make her way over to him. She opened her arms out, gesturing him in for a hug, "I'll see you in the morning?"

Subaru gladly embraced her, the two hugging one another for an extendedly long moment. He smiled, responding, "See you tomorrow." They separated, the two giving one last look at one another. Subaru commented, "You know, I don't think I can get used to you being older than me... and the same height as me."

Petra blinked, then laughed. She looked at him funnily, "Technically, you're centuries older than I am! But, still," she leaned in a little closer, lowering her voice to a quiet whisper as she smugly retorted, "it's funny that you say that, considering your girlfriend is about four-hundred years older than you."

Subaru stared ahead of him as she backed away, his face subtly reddening at the sudden realization, which subsequently made her laugh. After that, Petra had actually given Pandora a quick, one-sided hug that caught the former Witch off-guard. Even though she hadn't hugged back, Pandora felt sincerely flattered by the action.

Petra and Beatrice waved goodbye, joining hands and making their own way back to where Petra lived. She'd given them a meeting place and time before she left, ensuring that everyone knew where to go and when to go there. Even if Subaru or Pandora somehow forgot, he was sure that he'd be able to find them through First Shift anyway.

Julius coughed into his fist, having awkwardly stood there for the entirety of their interactions, and promptly asked the duo if they were ready to go. Without anything delaying them, Subaru agreed and Julius began showing them the way.

The walk there was as quiet as it could've been. Nobody talked or made any sudden, odd noises. Subaru had flipped up his hood and kept Third Shift active the entire time, not wanting to tip Julius off to their relationship.

In a way, he and Pandora's lack of contact upset him and, through Third Shift, he knew it upset her too. Despite their usual issue not being a problem, they both seemed to feel a sense of longing for the other.

It wasn't too terribly long before they reached the palace, the guards immediately stopping them outside before they could proceed inside. Even though it was annoying, it was just their job. One of the guards looked at them, his eyes narrowed critically while he professionally inquired, "State your business."

Julius did his usual polite, formal bow in greeting, "My name is Julius Juukulius; these are my associates," he gave a simple gesture back to the duo behind him. "I am here to speak with the Queen about an urgent matter, one regarding a proposal I was once offered."

The guard's eyes widened, surprised, "You're Julius Juukulius? I heard that you didn't want to return to this job because of-"

"With all due respect, I really need to meet with the Queen immediately. It is a matter of utmost importance," Julius interjected, uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading. Subaru's expression fell, feeling bad for his friend.

The guard seemed to falter, but regained his professional expression fairly quickly, "I'm sorry, sir, I cannot let you in without a signed pass from allied nobility."

Julius rolled his eyes, grunting and groaning quietly to himself in frustration as he began digging into his left pocket. Subaru could only wonder what he was looking for until the old knight pulled out a very torn, crumpled piece of paper. He held it with both hands, taking his time to unfold and straighten it as best as possible.

Once it was eligible, he showed it to the guard in a way that blatantly displayed his annoyance, "This is my pass. As you can see, it is signed by the Queen herself. Now, could you kindly let us pass?"

The guard stiffened as soon as he saw the signature on the paper, stepping aside with vigorous haste and gesturing to the entrance, "Welcome, sir. Of course, you may come in." Julius sighed as he stuffed the paper back into his pocket, taking a step forward immediately after doing so with Subaru and Pandora trailing closely behind.

They silently strode into the palace, asking a few guards here and there for directions on where to go, which eventually led them to one of the Queen's private meeting rooms. Inside, the three sat together quietly and alone.

Pandora sat next to Subaru, sneakily taking advantage of the privacy to hold his hand without anyone noticing. They both enjoyed that. Julius sat across from them on his own seat, minding his own business with crossed arms as he rather impatiently awaited the Queen's arrival.

Just as it felt like they were waiting uncomfortably too long, a yell broke through the silent atmosphere, "I said leave me alone, you asshole! I said it's fine, so just leave it!"

"I-I'm sorry, Felt-sama, but you must look your best for your meeting-"

The door to the room opened, everyone's heads turning toward it. The figure that stood halfway in the doorway wore a surprisingly casual outfit: a black top, dark blue pants and rather fancy shoes that paired oddly with the choice of clothing. Her hair was nicely put together as well, short and neatly brushed sporting a black decorative bow at its top right.

"I don't care what it looks like, just leave it alone! I'm perfectly comfortable in what I'm wearing, thank you!" After that, she backed fully into the room and slammed the door. Once the echo of the door slamming settled, her figure slumped against the door, her forehead pressing against it as she groaned in annoyance.

The onlookers could only stare at the girl in pity, patiently waiting for her to compose herself before even trying to say anything. The girl turned around, still slumped against the doorframe, sighing. Subaru could clearly see her red eyes from where he sat; from a single glance he noticed the bags underneath them, indicating just how tired she really was.

"Geez... why can't they ever learn to just leave me be," she muttered under her breath, leaning her head forward and roughly rubbing her eyes with both of her hands.

Everyone in the room couldn't help but pity her. Soon enough, she stood up straight with another sigh and began making her way over to them.

The closer she got, the more Subaru noticed that she was a lot taller. Well he supposed that came with getting older, but she seemed to be about his height or even slightly taller than him — it was very close to Petra's current height.

She looked at Julius in particular with almost feigned keen interest, wasting no time in forming a rather witty remark, "So, Julius, it seems as though you finally came back. I didn't think you'd actually keep my little note with you at all times; maybe you really wanted to come back, all along? Hmm~?"

Julius just gazed down a little, obviously very tired and just wanting to get the event over with. He sighed, "Felt-sama, I-"

She interrupted him with a loud groan, slumping her posture back in a show of displeasure. She used a hand to visually wave off his statement, "Drop the 'sama', it's annoying."

Julius deadpanned at her, "But that is incredibly unladylike and unprofessional."

Felt rolled her eyes, "I don't care. Reinhard's not here to boss me around with that kinda stuff right now, so just drop it." Subaru also swore he heard her mutter, "It's not like he could anyway, I'm his Queen now."

Julius sighed again, "Felt, I am here on urgent business. To confess, this is not just about my return to knighthood."

"Oh~?" she sang, flopping herself onto one of the chairs and leaning herself against the table in front of her with a half-feigned expression of interest. "Color me intrigued. So, what're you here for then?"

Subaru supposed that it was his time to shine. He shifted himself a little to the side, reaching his free hand behind his head and grabbing hold of the hood. Felt noticed the sudden action from the corner of her eye, her head turning his way with new, seemingly genuine, interest.

He took in a small breath in through his nose, his body slightly stiffening as he readied himself for Felt's reaction. The hand grasping his hood flew back in an instant, taking the clothing down with it, revealing his face for the room to bear witness.

Felt's reaction was unusually delayed. It was as though everything about her just froze; her expression, her inner thoughts and emotions... everything just seemed to come to a halt. When she finally blinked, her expression still hadn't changed. It was a bit unsettling, to say the least.

Her head slowly tilted to its side, similarly turning toward Julius. Her lips finally parted, "Julius... you should know that it's not nice to bring illusionists in here."

Julius flinched at the coldness of her tone, "Felt-sa... Felt, please, this is not a-"

"Julius," she interrupted, her voice sharp yet eerily calm, making him reel back. He unknowingly began to sweat as she raised an arm, gesturing to Subaru's form, "Are you telling me that this is a hallucination, then?"

Nervously, he shook his head to deny that statement, "No- No! That is not what I was implying at all. This is-"

He was interrupted by a rather unsettling laugh, "Oh, good..." Another unsettling laugh echoed through the room. "I thought I was seeing things again."

It was then that Julius officially came to a loss for words. Subaru, who'd been uneasily watching the entire interaction, began to feel immensely bad for Felt. It was similar to

what Petra had said, regarding seeing things and having hallucinations... which made everything hit just a little harder.

Subaru shared a glance with Pandora for a moment, conveying a silent message to one another. They realized that the situation was becoming intense, for varying reasons, and knew that something needed to be done.

Subaru wanted to say something, but would that really be the wisest thing to do? If he said something, what would it be? He couldn't say just anything, due to Felt's currently unusual, perhaps mangled, mindset, so he'd have to choose his words very meticulously.

He gulped, slightly nervous, his lips parting in preparation to speak, "Uhm- Now I know that-

He has no time to even begin, his eyes suddenly seeing a mess of blurs before everything began to settle. Gusts of winds shot past everyone, shaking some of the objects within the room with intense force. Julius leant forward, late to react, but shocked at the sight.

Subaru remained frozen in place, his eyes refocusing and beginning to adjust to his surroundings again. They ended up crossing, looking down toward his nose and directly at the point of a sharp, shaking dagger. It's appearance, though sudden, was blatantly apparent. It was a bit bigger than Petra's own dagger in size, much fancier and made better overall. Shockingly, the hand that held it belonged to the current Queen of Lugnica.

That wasn't all. A part of him wasn't even surprised when he saw Pandora, sitting up from her seat, leaning forward and holding Felt's wrist with a firm, hard grasp. Felt's arm shook in her hold, desperately attempting to move forward yet to no avail. She was locked in Pandora's tight, unwavering hold.

Pandora moved her arm, turning it away from her, toward the side, and subsequently bringing Felt's wrist back with it. Felt repeatedly tried to break free from Pandora's hold, but it just wouldn't budge. Her wrist was bent back into an uncomfortable, then soon enough painful, position. Instinctively, her grip on the dagger loosened on its own, a relatively loud clang echoing throughout the room once it finally hit the ground.

Pandora's grip on Felt's wrist loosened only then, suddenly moving itself to her chest and pushing the Queen back. Her butt hit the chair, a bit stunned and baffled as to what had just happened.

It wasn't long before her mind cleared again though, reacting almost immediately and trying to lunge forward in an attempt to attack once again. However, Julius was fortunately able to react in time; he wrapped his arms around her, retraining her in a form, yet gentle, hold.

"Felt-sama, I implore you to listen," Julius tried to reason, doing his best to keep his hold on Felt within his arms.

She struggled like her life depended on it, actively wiggling and thrashing very violently as she tried to escape. Her intentions were more than clear, with hostility radiating off of her in every form and manner possible, "Let me kill him! I'll execute you all! I'll execute all of you, I fucking swear it!"

Subaru shook himself out of his trace after hearing those words. This was bad; really bad. He needed to do something, but his mind was buzzing with all of the commotion and trying to figure it out. He only stared and watched as Julius and Felt struggled with one another for a while, unable to properly decide on what to say or do.

As his eyes moved to Julius, staring at him for a long moment, he finally realized what he could do. He'd convinced Julius by sharing private knowledge, why couldn't he do the same here?!

He had the perfect event to use. Quickly, he opened his mouth, "Felt! Remember the loot house? Uh... you stole that insignia and I tried to trade my phone for it, but we all had to fight Elsa because she tried to kill us! Then-"

He was interrupted by Felt's incoherent grumbles. Upon getting another look at her, his words didn't seem to help. Instead, it seemed as though they made her even angrier, "Don't you dare try using that against me! I was the one that revealed that incident to the public, I'm not stupid!"

What...? Subaru reeled back, a little shocked at the reveal. Upon thinking about it, he recalled that the incident was listed on the statue. How could he be so stupid...

Would he have to get more personal? What was even more personal that he could even try saying?

After a bit more intense thinking, he finally had it. It was embarrassing, and Pandora probably wouldn't like it, but it seemed as though it was the only thing he had left to say. He glanced at Pandora, seeing as she stood by his side; the former Witch was ready to act if the situation presented it.

He took a deep breath, preparing himself, "Okay, how about this... You always teased me for being obvious with Emilia. Look, I admit, I was crushing back then, okay? I basically had hearts in my eyes when I saw her and you knew it! You also called us 'Big Bro' and 'Big Sis', because of what happened at the Loot House, and secretly wanted us to get together!"

With every word he spoke after the first sentence, her tantrum finally began to steadily settle. She began to relax, her yells lessening whilst her body slumped in her seat. Julius slowly let go of her, seeing her sudden change in behavior, but still stayed close in case of an emergency.

As Felt essentially collapsed against her chair, she blankly stared ahead with an indifferent seeming expression. It stayed that way for many, many minutes while everyone else in the room anxiously awaited her next move. "Is it really you...?" her mouth hardly moved, her voice coming across as more of soft whisper than not. "I don't... I can't-" her words stopped, her head giving one small shake, "I can't believe that you're real."

Subaru could see how visibly broken she really was. He wasn't sure about how his absence could've affected Felt as severely as it did, but he knew that she needed his help; he needed to help her.

He activated Third Shift, slowly lifting a leg and taking a single step closer to her. It was followed by another, then another after that, until he finally reached her. He knelt down in front of her, his face doing its best to form a friendly, encouraging smile.

Her eyes followed him, one of his arms reaching out to her, gently gracing her own with a careful touch. She felt it right away, reveling in that feeling. Her lips parted as she questioned in a low, quiet voice, "Big Bro...?"

He kept his smile; it even widened a little. His head nodded twice in confirmation, after a moment, "Hey, little sis. It's me; I'm here."

Her expression hadn't changed, but, the next time she blinked, her eyes softened as tears formed in their corners. She sniffled, Subaru clearly seeing how much she was trying to hold back her emotions.

Subaru was the one to actually make a move, since Felt was being characteristically stubborn. He leant forward, both of his arms extended out as they gently wrapped around her in an embrace. She was stiff at the interaction, internally debating on what to do.

He could feel when her arms started to shakily lift themselves up, the internal struggle preventing them from fully acting on their own. Subaru just kept his arms around her, unwavering in his mindset, "It's okay, I'm here. I'm really here and I'm not gonna be leaving again, I promise."

That's when the dam broke, at last. Felt heard his voice; Those kind, touching words that she'd missed hearing all that time ago. Her arms flew around him in a tight embrace, her face digging itself into his chest as she cried. Subaru just kept hugging her, rubbing her back just as he had done for Petra.

Felt and Petra's reactions were definitely very similar, but he didn't know if that made things easier or harder to handle. As Felt cried into his chest, she desperately spoke in a low voice, saying things like: "Why did you leave us," "Where were you all this time?" and, "I missed you."

He didn't answer any of them, instead choosing to keep comforting her as best he could. Julius watched intently, but smiled to himself at the sight. To him, it was simply extraordinary. His friend always did have a way with people.

Pandora also watched from behind, her expression under the hood being that of wondering and contemplation. Her head tilted at the sight, studying each of their actions and behaviors with analytical precision. At some point, her lips curved up into a small smile and a lone hand slowly made its way over to her stomach, gently resting overtop it.

Felt, being an overall more stubborn and less emotional individual, was able to compose herself rather quickly, at least compared to how long Subaru expected it to take. Only minutes had passed, but it surely felt a lot longer to everyone in the room.

The two broke their embrace soon after, Felt raising an arm to her eyes and quickly wiping the tears away. She still sniffled, but she was able to look at Subaru clearly now. She saw his smile... his stupidly ridiculous, overly friendly smile that had no place being there.

SMACK!

Subaru reeled his head to the side, having been slapped clean on the cheek by Felt. Pandora and Julius had immediately inched forward as a result of an instinctive reaction, but, seeing as though there were no true hostile intentions, they stayed back.

Subaru snapped his head back to Felt, his expression gaping in surprise, "What was that for?!"

"I'm mad at you!" she retorted, her arms crossing as she turned her head away in a pout. "You deserved it."

He only sighed, "I'm really sorry."

"You better be," was her reply.

"I'm not going to disappear again," he insisted.

"You better not," he sighed again at her answer, knowing full well how stubborn she was.

She was being a pain in the butt, like usual, but he knew that it was all for understandable reasons this time. He stayed silent, letting her cool off a bit. Eventually, his waiting resulted in the Queen uncrossing her arms and looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"Do you have any idea what we've all been through, you idiot?"

"If those statues around the Capital were any indication, then yes, I do," he wittily responded, doing his best to act as though the comment she made hadn't actually hurt

him.

She averted her gaze, cheeks slightly reddening. She embarrassingly scratched a cheek with one of her hands, "Oh... you saw those?"

At her reaction, he let a small smile reappear on his face, "How could I not? They're all over the place. I didn't know I meant so much to everyone..."

She narrowed her eyes, refocusing on him due to his little comment, "Of course you do, dumbass."

"Inciting that we don't care about you is foolish, my friend," Julius said, even looking a bit dejected.

Subaru was, at first, surprised to hear their words. He didn't have time to think about it for long, though, as he saw Felt lower her head. She looked at her legs, bent up underneath her as she uttered out, "I'm glad you're back, Big Bro."

He gaped at her a little, eyes blinking in slight shock, but soon smiling in return, "It's good to be back."

Her head turned to the side, her eyes falling on the outlier of the group. Despite her current state of mind, her curiosity compelled her to ask, "Who's the chick, bro?"

The Queen's question didn't come as much of a surprise to anyone in the room. After Pandora supernaturally caught Felt's wrist mid-attack, they all knew the question would come soon after.

Julius spoke up to answer, "This dame goes by the name 'Panda'. She is a demi-human that wears the robe to help with her shyness in public."

Subaru expected Felt to be a little suspicious, or, at the very least, ask questions, but, instead, she just looked more sad than anything. Whether it was from a bad memory or not he wasn't sure, but, either way, his heart went out to her.

She just looked at Pandora, her lips slowly and awkwardly moving to speak, "Oh... well, nice to meet you, I guess."

Pandora didn't verbally respond, instead opting to give a simple, single nod. Subaru understood it as, "Likewise."

Felt looked back up to him, shaking her head to take herself out of whatever thoughts she'd stumbled into. He could see that, despite how she tried to make it look, she was nervous about what she wanted to say.

In spite of that, she gathered the will to talk anyway, "It's late so... do you... want to stay and have dinner?"

Subaru looked at her strangely, silently realizing that it was, indeed, likely very late. He already had one of Beatrice's remedies that morning, which essentially eliminated the need to eat until the next morning, but he supposed that he could oblige Felt's request. He didn't want to let her down, or upset her, and he was, quite frankly, more than happy to spend more time with her.

He smiled, "I'd be happy to."

Everyone soon gathered downstairs in one of Felt's small, more private, dining areas. It wasn't as big, or as fancy, as the usual table, but it certainly provided them with much more privacy.

Subaru and Pandora sat next to one another, but kept Third Shift continuously active. They didn't want to reveal anything to either Felt or Julius, or lead them to suspect anything in general. The duo had realized that, if they figured things out, the result

would not be very good for anyone involved. It would be an awkward eating session because of Third Shift, but they'd been through worse with it... so that didn't bother them.

Julius sat across from them on the other side of the table, with Felt beside them all at the head. They'd waited for a good while for the food to be ready, sitting in awkward silence for the duration.

The staff came in and quickly served them their food before leaving the group to their business. The food wasn't anything extravagant, not even being too much in terms of quantity, but it definitely looked appetizing.

Silently, they each took their servings and ate on their own. Pandora in particular ate with both grace — by using proper etiquette — and minor sloppiness. Her way of eating was reserved, but at the same time she liked to wolf down her food in a hurry.

It actually surprised Subaru for a moment. The more he thought about it, he realized that he'd never actually seen her eat anything before. Ever since their release, they'd only ever drank Beatrice's special remedy; the more he thought about *that*, the more he realized that her way of eating and drinking were actually similar. Neat, reserved, yet hurriedly sloppy.

Well, he was always happy to learn more about her.

He slowly ate his own food, quickly coming to terms with how divine the taste was. It must've been because he hadn't eaten for so long. He made sure to savor every bite.

As he did this, he looked up to the others at the table. They seemed to only be keeping to themselves, awkwardly eating as if each every one of them existed in their own private little bubble; thus, everyone was afraid of popping said bubbles.

Felt took a bite of her food, dejectedly looking down at her plate as she did her best to gather whatever courage she could muster. Her hands rested on the table, her eyes softening, as she voiced, "A lot of things changed, since you left."

Subaru looked over at her, a similar expression present on his face, "I know. I want to... I want to know what I've missed, so I can make up for it."

Felt silently processed his words for a moment, taking her time in answering. She shook her head, raising it up to meet his eyes, "I'll be honest with you. Things have been bad. Really bad. Off the fucking ground dragons, bad."

He could only nod, his gaze quietly averting from hers. He was at a loss for words, truly not knowing what to really say. Pandora looked over at him, swallowing some of the food that she'd been eating and promptly tried to reach over to him. She did it, her hand laying over top of his, luckily with decent cover.

Subaru, feeling Pandora's comforting touch, started to feel just a little better. Having been reminded about how awful things were for everyone, he'd begun sinking into the tombs of his own depression. Thankfully, Pandora pulled him out in time.

Subaru's lips parted, a breath coming in before being let out, words finally reaching his tongue, "What happened?"

Felt processed his words, thinking to herself silently for a few seconds before saying, "A lot." She sighed, internally searching for the best method on how to continue, "Not too long after you disappeared, Big Sis dropped out of the Selection and Karsten ended up dying because of... fuck, I don't even remember. It's been so long."

Subaru froze at that, the news coming at him with a lot of weight behind it. It mentally made him collapse. He hadn't expected to hear that kind of news, but... unfortunately, it's ended up happening. Pandora's hand squeezed his own to help comfort him, which it did, but he remained stiff.

"After that, the bastard Ferris killed himself because his 'precious lady' died," Felt hit the table angrily. "Dammit!" she cursed, taking deep breaths to try and calm herself down. She shook her head, trying to get out of her own anger episode, yet still frustratingly parting her lips to continue, "That left us without 'the greatest healer around', which definitely didn't help with..." she trailed off, loudly groaning in frustration once more.

Again, the information hit Subaru like a ton of bricks. The fact that one of his close friends was gone, having taken his own life as an indirect result of his disappearance, was devastating to hear. He knew how much Crusch meant to him, so, knowing that she'd died, Subaru assumed that Felix simply must've lost the will to live.

He missed how Pandora, next to him, reacted. She was a tad — definitely just a tad, totally not massively — angry at what Felix had done. She'd heard about him from Subaru during their time together, so she couldn't help but be quite furious over the sheer irony of his demise. For someone that hated suicide — disliking people that took their own life for whatever reason it may have been — he certainly didn't mind joining that group himself.

"After that, well..." she gestured an arm to Julius, who was already flinching and cringing at the painful memories of having lost a good friend. The next mention would shake him even more, as Felt started, "Anastasia had to drop out because of her health. Then that stuck-up bitch went back to Vollachia because of the stupid fucking war, so that left this country with only one candidate left! Guess who that was!"

She gestured to herself, her voice strained and expression pained. Subaru could tell that the entire situation bothered her to no end; he could only imagine what she must've gone through because of the position forced upon her.

Although, he was unsure of one thing; one thing that confused him, that didn't make sense. He opened his mouth to ask, "Why did Vollachia even declare war? I thought that Vincent agreed to a peace treaty, after he regained the throne?"

Felt lowered her arms, putting them back onto the table and leaning forward as she thought about how to answer his question. "I don't know," she admitted, looking up at him. "They just... declared war, a few months after you disappeared. I don't fucking know why and it pisses me off!"

She became increasingly frustrated by the end of her dialogue, having once again hit the table in a show of aggression. Subaru may not have wanted to believe it but, even if everyone else was naive as to the reason behind the war, he felt as if he knew.

It was his fault, wasn't it?

He felt a squeeze around his hand, which helped him refocus... but not much. He was still drowning in the sea of which his guilt resided. He felt sadness and overall frustration at himself for letting such events even occur.

The only thing he didn't understand was why. Why would Vincent declare war on Lugnica because of him? Was he really that important to some people?

He lightly shook his head. That didn't matter right now. He would gain nothing pondering those questions. As of now, he knew that there was a meaningless war at play. A war that shed unnecessary blood. Nobility, soldiers and innocent people were dying.

He shook his head. Everything was just so *wrong*. Nothing was right. He needed to *fix this*.

Subaru looked up at the Queen of Lugnica with downcast eyes, though it was evident that they reached out with some remnant of hope. He hesitantly inquired, "Is it okay if I ask something...?"

Felt looked back at him, her eyes widening at his low and sad tone. "Of course it's okay to ask me things! You can ask me anything!" she insisted, palms flattening against the table as she lifted herself up to further exude her point.

"How are they?" was his simple, yet hard to ask, question.

Felt paused for a moment. She glanced over at Julius once before she was able to fully figure out who exactly he was talking about. She looked back at Subaru, a soft and exhausted expression on her face, "You were really worried about asking me that?" She sighed, flopping back down into her chair, unsurely fiddling with her fingers.

Subaru remained still and silent as he waited for Felt to answer. A large part of him was worried, scared that more of his friends had perished during his time in solitude. It was such a nightmarish feeling to have. He didn't know everyone personally, but they all left their own significant impacts on him.

Frederica, Anastasia, Crusch and Felix all left their respective marks. He cared for them all, despite not having been around them as much as others have. They didn't deserve to meet the fate that had been unfairly cursed upon them.

"I'll start with Rein," the Queen suddenly voiced, taking Subaru's mind out of his thoughts in a flash. "He's..." she trailed off, attempting to find the right way to describe it, "He tries to look fine, but... if you've been around him for long enough, you know that he's not. Other than that, he's doing alright. But, he really does miss you."

Subaru nodded, acknowledging Felt's answer. He was internally glad that Reinhard was alive and relatively okay. A part of him was sad at the fact that his friend — someone who wanted to be known as Reinhard the person, rather than the Sword Saint the hero — was stuck fighting in a pointless war using the very title he didn't wish to have.

"For your other friends, Meili and Garfiel," Subaru perked up at the mention of his friend and daughter figure. Felt thought for a moment, a hand on her chin as she did so, before continuing, "From the last update I got, which was two weeks ago, they were doing fine." She looked back at him, "They've been a really big help during this dumb war. They're one of the best teams we have."

Subaru let himself smile a little at that. Felt's statement matched perfectly with his image of them. Willing to fight and stick things through to the end. They weren't quitters, unwilling to relent or give up, and thus they complimented one another very well. Subaru was sure that Meili and Garfiel got along great. He was glad that they were okay.

"Subaru, my friend, did you know that your friend has gotten married?" Julius asked from across the table, immediately getting Subaru's attention. Seeing his friend's interested expression, Julius smiled. He closed his eyes to recall the tale, "Yes, your friend married my former colleague, Mimi Pealbaton, a few years back. However, the two dated for some time before completely tying the knot."

Subaru could only look at Julius, completely and utterly surprised. He hadn't expected that. At all.

He knew that Garfiel and Mimi had some kind of 'connection', starting from when they'd first met in Priestella, but he had no clue that it'd grow *that* much. Don't get him wrong, he was happy for them! He really was! It was just so surreal, almost hard to believe.

Though, he supposed that he'd have to go see Mimi sometime. Subaru smiled, thinking of getting all kinds of juicy stories from Mimi so that he could tease his friend. Just like old times.

At the thought, his smile fell. Like old times, huh? That seemed almost impossible to imagine, now. He wanted to go back to how things were, but would it even be possible

anymore? Did he really deserve to have that kind of relationship with them after leaving everyone for so long, pushing them into an irreversible fate such as this?

Pandora squeezed his hand again, reading his emotions through their connection. He internally sighed, cursing himself for making her worry about him so much. Why couldn't he just *stop*?

Before things could get too out of hand, Felt spoke up, "Would you like me to... request them all here?" He slowly looked up, eyeing her incredulously. She clarified, "As Queen, I can order them all back. With Rein picking them up, they'd all be here within a day or two! I'm sure they'd be happy to come back, knowing that you're here!"

Subaru continued to look at her with the same expression, "I- I can't ask you to do that."

"No!" she insistently exclaimed, sitting up to further push her point. "Don't argue about it, dumbass! I know you want to see them, so I'm calling them back!"

"But... But the war!" Subaru yelled back, trying to reason with her.

However, it was no avail, "To hell with the damn fucking war, this is more important." She grumbled, momentarily shifting her eyes away before bringing them back, "It's too late now, but I swear to you that tomorrow morning I'm calling them right away!"

Subaru blinked at her, his eyes drifting away as her words registered in his mind. He mumbled a simple, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," was her similarly simple, Felt-like reply. After that, she simply returned to eating her food.

Julius reluctantly did this same, feeling slightly out of place during the whole conversation. However, the former Finest Knight was, indeed, very much looking forward to seeing his friends once again. It would be great to have everyone reunited once more.

Subaru couldn't help but feel bad about taking them all away from something so important. Felt had implied herself that they were incredibly important on the battlefield, having been such a valuable and helpful team.

But another part of him was so happy that they were coming back. He was happy that they'd be away from the fighting, away from something that could end their lives. He would know that they were safe, if they were here with them.

Subaru just proceeded to eat the rest of his meal, the exquisite taste having faded a long while ago.

"I don't know what to do, Dora."

"You need to rest."

"Everything here is just... so messed up."

"Baru, you should lie down and try to sleep. It may help you."

"How can I sleep when everything is my fault?!"

He snapped, his voice cracked and having been raised, directed at his Eternal Partner. She didn't flinch, nor did she even really react; she just stayed silent, standing in front of his sitting form as he wallowed in his depressive thoughts.

They were in a guest bedroom at the Royal Palace. After everyone finished their meal, Felt had practically begged him to spend the night using some rather unexpectedly

cute puppy-dog eyes. It definitely got to him, but it wasn't like it was necessary... since they didn't have a place to stay, anyway.

It hadn't taken long to prepare at all, leaving them to get into a room rather quickly. Subaru and Pandora were actually given the same room, upon their personal request. The room had two separate beds in it to accommodate them, but they weren't going to be using one of them. That led to the current situation.

Remaining apart using Third Shift, Subaru sat on the bed, back slouching and his face forward, while Pandora stood in front of him. She still only looked at him, waiting patiently for him to vent his troubles to her.

He shook his head, "That's the gambit, isn't it?" He paused, narrowing his eyes at nothing in particular. Pandora tilted her head, unsure as to what he meant by that inquiry.

His hands, pressing against his knees, clenched into fists as his breath steadily became shakier. She continued to watch, reaching a hand out to him and grabbing his arm. She gently caressed it, attempting to soothe him.

He soon spoke his next words, "I save you, I get you to become a good person... I give you an actual life. But because of that, I take away everyone else's."

She stayed quiet, kneeling down in front of him to meet his eyes. He reluctantly obliged, the two locking their gazes together with an invisible strand. Her other hand took his, both of them silently enjoying the feeling of one another's contact. She lightly shook her head, "That is not true."

"How is it not?" he quickly retorted, his free hand dramatically gesturing to the side as if to bring attention to something. "Everything that's happened is because of me."

Pandora shot back, "You do not know that. Some things may have been set in stone from the beginning. Time is relative," she reasoned. "We ourselves are living proof of that. We do not know if it could have been prevented, if... it was their time."

"I could've," he responded, sighing dejectedly. "I could've found a way... I could've... I..."

Pandora shook her head again, lightly tightening both of her respective holds on him, "Nobody would have wanted you to make yourself suffer." Just as he was about to retort, she spoke up again, "I may not know your friends personally, but you have told me a lot about them. From that, I know that this is not what they would have wanted from you."

Subaru shut his mouth, choosing not to respond. He didn't want to believe those words, but they were most certainly true. His friends — everyone that he'd developed a close bond with since suddenly appearing in this world — would not want him to act like this. They wouldn't want him saying these things, putting himself down in favor of bringing them up. It just wasn't how they were.

Pandora sighed. His attention fell back onto her, the expression she wore deeply drilling into him. She concluded with a simple, yet incredibly impactful, "Baru, the way I see it, the only person blaming you, is you."

He registered it clearly, the words echoing in his mind over and over again like it was on loop. He really was the only one blaming himself, wasn't he? How pathetic of him.

In one last ditch effort to deny it all, he argued, "Everything around us is different. Things have changed for the worse..."

"Then fix it," she interrupted, momentarily surprising him. "Is that not what we are here to do? Is that not why we sought out your friends to begin with? You wish to make things right, not wallow in your self-blame. Instead of the latter, I suggest we act on

completing the former." She gently smiled at him, conveying her support to him through it, "I am here with you. You know that. I will help you in whatever way I can, always."

He blinked, fully taking in her speech. A small smile similarly spread across his face to match hers. She was right, absolutely so. He was the only one blaming himself... having lost track of what he had come to the Capital to do. There was still an opportunity to help those that were left, to make things right with them instead of just leaving everything alone to negatively fester.

Within himself, a sense of positivity arose. It was unexpected, but not unwelcome. He resolved himself to do better when he fought Regulus. He made it a point to give his love and care to those that needed it; to those that deserved it.

So, that was what he was going to do. He was going to be there for everyone. He was going help them all, end the pointless war and get everything back on the right track. It was incredibly ambitious, but he'd make sure that it all came to fruition.

He went to stand up, having had a rush of motivation, but Pandora immediately shut him down, gently pushing him back down onto the bed. Now suddenly confused, he tilted his head at her. Funnily enough, she was also confused; her mouth opened to ask, "Where do you plan on going?"

"We need to get the Witch Factors from the Archbishops, don't we?"

She shook her head, "No. Not tonight. You have had a long day. Resting is more important for you than anything else, right now."

Subaru wanted to argue, "But-"

She put a finger to his lips, effectively shushing him. "I do not want to hear any retorts from you," she demanded. "We will attempt to get them in the morning, before our meeting with Petra."

Subaru sighed, willing to accept Pandora's, quite frankly, outrageous demand. The two then dedicated themselves to getting ready for bed, choosing to wear some nighttime clothes that came with the room they were given.

Offhandedly, Subaru commented toward Pandora, "So, you're getting along with Petra well, huh?"

He did his best to smile mischievously at her. As a result, her eyes drifted to the side with an embarrassed pout. He hummed teasingly, enticing her to respond, "...She is a very tolerable girl."

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to say that you enjoy being around her."

Pandora half-heartedly glared at him, causing him to chuckle a little. "It is not that," she tried to argue, very poorly.

"Sure, sure. I 'believe' you," he teased, very proud of himself for finally getting one over on her. Either way, after a moment, he settled and chose to comment on something else, "I'm proud of you, Dora." She perked up at the praise, having not expected it. "I'm glad that you're opening up to people."

Overall, he was incredibly proud of and happy for her. The fact that she was getting along with someone apart from himself and Beatrice was a really big deal for him. Though, he supposed that Petra herself just had that type of effect on people.

When he looked at her, he saw nothing but an embarrassed girl, a blush occupying her cheeks while she fiddled with strands of her hair using two fingers. In a way, he was surprised, not having expected his praise to have such a great effect on her. Though, the sight before him was incredibly cute, so he wasn't complaining one bit.

"Thank you," she muttered, the gratefulness blatant in her angelic tone.

He smiled, "Anytime."

The two soon after crawled into bed, clinging to one another just like any other night. At the same time, everyone else was in bed too.

Petra, the girl that experienced an undeserving great depression due to unprecedented loss and loneliness. She struggled to keep going, living life by a thread each day in hopes of a better tomorrow. The only thing that kept her together with the hope of her hero's return. That hope came to fruition, growing and spreading all throughout her into a strengthening motivation to rise up.

Julius, the former Finest Knight, who experienced great tragedy. He became lost, unsure of where to place himself within such a different and cruel world; a tunnel surrounded him, the darkness within it slowly eating away at him as he begrudgingly lived on. But then, a small glimmer of light sparked at the end of it. He ran toward it, letting it get bigger and bigger until he was finally free. He could place himself somewhere new in the world, at last.

Felt, the Queen of Lugnica, burdened with overbearing responsibilities that ate away at her soul. Her mind corrupted, collapsing and falling apart under the weight of responsibilities she wasn't prepared to handle. But a pillar erected out of the darkness to keep it standing, promising to keep her stable and stay by her side through the troubles of life. She was grateful, the weight lessening and allowing her to stand upright once more.

Beatrice, the Great Spirit of Yin, who suffered for many, many years in the effort of reaching one goal. It was ironic. No matter what happened to her mind and body, she pushed forward. She kept going even when she wanted to curl up, cry and quit. To her, it was all worth it in the end. Her goal was finally achieved and she got back more than she could have ever lost. Through the pain she always felt, he still helped her feel comfort and happiness.

Subaru and Pandora, Eternal Partners, who stuck together for an eternity, wasting away in nothing but an empty void with nothing but their own company. Their hate grew into friendship, then to love. They stuck together, glued in an inseparable embrace, even as their minds descended into madness. They hold one another by the hip to keep standing, continuously pushing through their own obstacles with the help of the other. They help raise one other up to become better people overall. You could not have one without the other, anymore. They were not alone.

All of them drifted to sleep at the same time that night. The outside was peaceful, quiet and calm. Almost nobody remained outdoors, the sound of hiding bugs being the only prominent noise in the night. The wind did not blow in a breeze, instead remaining still and calm. It was nice, relaxing even.

So... why did everyone simultaneously feel the same cold, eerie chill?

***Chapter 10*: Re:Venge**

Yeah, I know, this is really late. Sorry.

Hopefully this chapter can make up for it. It's another REALLY long one. Hopefully some parts don't seem rushed, but I'm confident in this one. I have a lot of moments here that I'm proud of.

I think it's time to prove why Pandora in this story has an irreplaceable role in this story. More specifically, the start of WHY I chose her.

"You know who" is also being added to the character tags. Yay!

I hope you all enjoy this one! I'm looking forward to hearing what you all think of it!

I appreciate every single one of you! Love you guys/girls! Haha...

Chapter 10: Re:Venge

~Two Weeks Ago~

A small hand lifted itself up, grabbing hold of a handle belonging to a rather large door. It held itself in place for a good few moments, fingers wrapped around the handle as the person holding it contemplated the action they were about to do.

The person sighed, slowly and slightly reeling their hand back and hesitatingly banging the handle against the door a few times. After that, their hand retracted from the handle and went back to their side, uneasily shaken up as they nervously waited for an answer.

It hadn't taken too long, thankfully. The door squeakily cracked itself open, revealing no more than a smidge for the person inside to look out. The one outside looked up into the gap, recognizing the oddly colored hair immediately.

"Ah, Beatrice-sama," the person inside spoke, opening the door a little more upon seeing someone they recognized. "It has... been a while."

The person outside, the Great Spirit Beatrice, nodded, "Indeed it has, pink-haired maid, I suppose."

With the door now opened fully, the maid on the inside revealed herself. Her hair was pink, running over her left eye whilst leaving her right unblocked. Compared to what Beatrice remembered, her hair was now a lot longer. In fact, it ran down all the way to her waist, a direct contrast to her previous hair style.

The two just looked at one another for a while. A silent stalemate, if one willed, but Beatrice had no interest in keeping such a prospect going, "Are you going to let me in, I wonder?"

Ram seemed to ponder that question for a moment. It irritated the Great Spirit, frustrated at the unnecessary delay. The pink-haired maid looked down at Beatrice unsurely, "What is your business here?"

She was tempted to growl, but greatly resisted the urge, "Betty is here to talk to Roswaal. Does Betty not have automatic jurisdiction, I suppose?"

At that, Ram had the gall to narrow her eyes, "Not after you disappeared for ten years. How am I supposed to know if you're friendly or not? How am I-"

"Ram, that is enough. Let her in."

The maid froze, visibly shrinking as she moved to the side. Ram's arm gestured inward, silently welcoming Beatrice into their home. The Great Spirit obliged, taking her time in stepping inside, eyes wandering in some form of morbid curiosity.

Eventually, they landed on the man she was looking for. He was coming down a set of stairs, a blue-haired maid, who shared the same characteristics as her twin, on his tail.

Once he reached the bottom, the blue-haired maid stood attentively to his left. Beatrice noticed that the maid's eyes softened upon seeing her, no doubt holding pity for her current condition. Beatrice hardly paid it any mind, though; she'd long since gotten used to it.

"It is good to see you again, Betty," the man stated, his voice rather low and neutral. Beatrice could just barely pick up the underlying sadness within. He eyed her up and down for a few seconds, "You look different, since I last saw you. Did you, perhaps, get a makeover?"

Beatrice wasn't exactly appreciating the comment, despite knowing that it was made in an attempt to lighten the mood. She decided to retort, "As do you. Betty sees that you ditched the clown outfit, I suppose. Finally, you chose something normal, for once."

"Yes, I suppose I have," to her surprise, Roswaal let out a half-hearted chuckle, slightly amused at the comment.

Behind the Great Spirit, the pink-haired maid silently shut the door and promptly began making her way to the Margrave's side. In a parallel to her sister, she stood attentively to his right; she had more hardened eyes, in comparison to her twin's softer ones.

In context to Beatrice's initial surprise, the Margrave seemed to have updated his wardrobe. Instead of his usual makeup and uniform, he now had no makeup and wore clothes more befitting of a noble in his position.

"I must... apologize," Roswaal started, his head moving slightly downcast, yet his eyes never leaving her. "I truly did not believe that the spell would have this effect on you."

Beatrice didn't give off any reaction, merely stating with the utmost certainty, "Betty does not care. The spell has done its job. Every mutation was worth it, in fact."

Roswaal's eyes glimmered with an unknown feeling, "I see." He nodded, his head tilting slightly upward as he pondered on his next question, "I do suppose that you are here because your journey has just about come to an end?"

The Great Spirit nodded, confirming the Margrave's statement, "Just as you requested of me, I suppose."

He nodded again, uttering under his breath, "Then it is time..." The maids at his side simultaneously looked at him with knowing gazes, glancing upon him with some sort of resolve. Beatrice didn't know what it meant, nor did she wish to. Roswaal lifted his head, speaking again, "Where are my manners... would you like some tea, Betty?"

She shook her head, "No, thank you. Betty is currently on a strict remedy diet, I suppose."

He only nodded, not paying mind to the Subarism she used, "Pardon me, then, but I would like to have a cup before we get to business."

Beatrice accepted that, letting Roswaal lead the small group of theirs into the dining room. Rem had been quick to get the requested tea ready, soon bringing it out for her lord to drink.

The Great Spirit watched as he poured himself a cup, refusing Rem and Ram's insistence on doing it for him. Soon after, he graciously took a sip before setting the cup back down onto the table.

Beatrice, after having gazed around for quite a while, asked a question sourced from her curiosity, "Where is the half-elf, I wonder?"

Roswaal merely looked at her, not lifting his cup, quickly answering, "Elior Forest, most likely." Before she could ask any more questions, he kept going, "She has been going there more often, throughout these last ten years. Emilia-sama does live here, but she has found a home with them, too."

The Great Spirit nodded, bringing herself to ask, "How is she, I suppose?"

The maids shared a glance. Beatrice could somewhat see the hidden fear and reluctance behind their eyes. In contrast to that, Roswaal answered calmly, "Better than how she was." He paused, taking a moment to recall some of his past memories, "Compared to her initial condition, she has... mostly recovered."

She only nodded, conveying her acknowledgment to the Margrave in a simple manner. Beatrice had no real interest in the half-elf's condition, so that information would be enough for now. Silence resumed, with Roswaal taking yet another sip of his tea.

A few moments after he did so, he spoke again, "I must be honest, I was starting to have doubts of you ever showing up. I did not think it would have taken ten years."

"The powers of Betty's Subaru and the Witch within are very great. It is incredibly difficult to reach their combined level, in fact," Beatrice responded, a bit frustrated. She raised her hands, looking into her palms, "Even though I am close to their level now, the power within me is too much, I suppose." She looked back up at Roswaal, her eyes shaken and slightly afraid, "It... changes Betty. If not for the remedy, it would have consumed me from within..."

Roswaal's eyes softened as he took another sip of his tea, then setting it back down on the table once more. His lips parted, "You cannot use that power to the fullest. If you do, you are afraid that you will change and never return. In addition, you feel as though absorbing many more creatures will also result in this outcome. Is that correct?"

"Yes," she started by giving slow nods, but they got progressively faster as each second passed, "that is correct."

"I understand," the Margrave spoke, taking yet another sip. This time, he held the cup in his hand as he voiced an odd comment, "Then, this will truly be the end."

Beatrice looked at him oddly, not correctly processing what he'd just stated, "What do you mean, I wonder?"

Roswaal only sighed, taking one last sip of tea. When he placed the cup back onto the table, it was empty. Without delay he stood up straight and tall, pivoting himself to the side and beginning to walk around the table.

Beatrice looked utterly confused, glancing at the two maids for some sort of answer. However, unfortunately, it seemed as though they had no intention of giving any indication. They still followed their lord around, though, until Roswaal arrived at the Great Spirit's side.

He looked down at her, and she looked up at him, for a few moments in silence. Nothing was said or conveyed; they just looked at one another with a sense of minor peacefulness and, in Beatrice's case, confusion. Then, without warning, he knelt down in front of her with a slight bow.

"Great Spirit Beatrice, as acting Court Mage, and friend, I offer my very being to helping fulfilling your goal," he began, his head angled toward the floor as he spoke. "I put forth my magic, power and soul for your endeavor."

Beatrice could only begin to gape at him. If she had been holding onto anything, she would have dropped it due to the sheer amount of shock she felt. Her eyes could only

stare at him in disbelief as the final words left his mouth.

The maids, who'd just been standing there by his side, were not faring any better. Their mouths hung open, bodies temping to shake more often than not. The twins shared a glance, eyes looking into the other's as they commenced in an invisible exchange.

The Great Spirit shook her head, knocking herself out of the trance she'd been put in, "Roswaal, Betty can-

"Betty."

She froze, her words halting in her mouth. She directed her gaze upward, opting to stare above Roswaal's bowing form and between the two idle maids. Eventually, when she noticed him move, her eyes were directed back down.

Looking back at her was the Margrave, her old friend, with eyes ever so soft and understanding. She didn't like that look...

"Please, Betty," his voice was low, gentle but desperately pleading to her. Beatrice shook her head, trying to refuse it, though he kept going, "Please, let me have this."

"Have what, I suppose?!" Beatrice snapped, not understanding his point. "Have death? Is that what you want, I wonder? You wish to die and leave Betty with yet another loss on her conscience?"

Roswaal's look didn't change, "You handled yourself fine, up until now." She immediately flinched, shrinking as the words sank in. They were harsh, but they weren't wrong. The Court Mage took a breath, "I must atone for all I have done, and the sins I have committed. And... as you said, you need one last push, lest you risk yourself too greatly."

Beatrice really, *really* wanted to argue. To yell at and berate him for even suggesting something like this as if it were appropriate. Yet... she couldn't.

Something within her, as she looked at Roswaal's expression, couldn't find the will to deny him his wish. She'd looked into his eyes, seeing the man she once knew oh so long ago. A good man, wishing to do right by his wrongs, looking for redemption.

What right did she have to take that away, when she too looked for the same thing?

She sighed, "Very well, then. Roswaal, if it is what you wish, I shall-

"Beatrice-sama, please wait," Ram interjected, stepping forward. Beatrice seemed a little irritated at the interruption, but her eyes tracked to the maid anyway. Imagine the Great Spirit's surprise when she too bowed before her, taking a place next to her lord's side, "Allow this Ram to request the same."

The Great Spirit could only gaping at her, repeating her earlier reaction. Her emotions were floored once more when the other twin stepped up too, bowing on Roswaal's other side, "Rem would like to stand by their side, as well."

Roswaal seemed to be surprised, too. He looked back and forth between his two, loyal maids with an expression full of disbelief, "You two... You do not have to do this."

"Roswaal-sama," Ram began, her head picking up so that her eyes could sharply drill into her master's own. "I have stood alongside you, even after all of these years. Even with your convoluted plans, your treacherous nature and depressive states, this Ram has followed you; and now, as you try to atone, I believe it would be a bad time to stop now."

Roswaal's eyes widened. He couldn't believe his ears. How could he, after hearing something as inconceivable as that?

Ram's eyes softened, her head looking up a little more to look upon the Great Spirit in full, "Beatrice-sama," Beatrice's attention went fully onto her as the maid continued, "I believe that this Ram owes Bar-... Subaru-sama, for all he has done."

The Great Spirit looked at the maid with critical eyes, attempting to read between the lines of her statement. She found nothing... not one ounce of double meaning or sarcasm; it was all genuine. Beatrice supposed that she could understand the maid's reasoning; without Subaru, many of the good things in life, things that had happened to them all, would never have come to pass.

Beatrice nodded, accepting the answer, looking to the other side in order to question the other twin, "And what of you, I wonder?"

Rem kept her head down for a moment, taking her time to think despite Beatrice's impatience. Soon enough, she lifted it, revealing the small tears running down her cheeks for everyone in the room to see, "Subaru... Subaru-kun has done so much for me... for everyone, since he first came into our lives... *my* life! Even when Rem gave him a hard time."

She shook her head, trying to shake away the negative thoughts regarding herself. It started once she got her memories back, but for the last ten years the maid had only been mostly living in her own guilt. She felt as though she'd done nothing but give Subaru trouble.

There was when he first arrived at the mansion. Her distrust caused issues when he only wanted to save everyone. She'd been a burden after that, too, having gone out of control in her Oni mode which caused Subaru and her sister to go after her. Then, most notably, there was what happened in Vollachia. She'd done nothing but raise hell for him there... from insulting him, not trusting him and overall causing him a lot of emotional, and at times physical, pain.

"The least Rem can do is help bring him back," she pleaded with a light voice, her eyes wide and desperate. She pleaded, "Please... Please let Rem do this."

Beatrice looked at her for a long while, internally debating everything to herself. She hadn't expected this; not at all. First Roswaal, then the maids. Admittedly, Beatrice didn't necessarily care for them as much as she did for Subaru, but... that was just it; how would Subaru react to this? What would he think of her, then?

If he learned of what happened to them, it would break his heart...

The Great Spirit feared the worst. He could cast her out, disown her and break their contract. After all, who would want a monster such as her as their contracted spirit? Certainly nobody; and if nobody would take her, then someone like Subaru definitely deserved better.

But... if him casting her away was what it took to bring him back — for him to be able to live the life he was always meant to fulfill — then it would be worth it. She took in a deep breath, attempting to relax herself in preparation of what she was about to do.

Beatrice nodded, looking over the three before her with soft eyes and a hint of reluctance. "Very well, I suppose," she started, the tone of her voice soft and somewhat unwilling. "Betty will begin, once you all are ready."

"I am ready," Roswaal immediately responded, staying in his kneeled position.

"This Ram is ready," Ram followed suit, her voice attempting to steady itself while her body lowered itself just a little further downward to the floor.

"Rem is ready," Rem spoke, her voice shaking and broken but strong-willed, determined to set things right.

Even if they wouldn't be around to see the outcome, they had all held faith.

Beatrice took in another breath through her nose, nodding, mainly to herself, in confirmation. "Betty understands, I suppose," she began, eyes soft as she gazed over them for what seemed to be the last time. Beatrice held out both of her arms, "It was nice knowing you all, in fact. Your sacrifices will not be in vain. Prepare yourselves."

The three couldn't help but brace as Beatrice readied the spell, each of them having different thoughts race through their minds all at once.

Roswaal hoped that this act would help put some of his sins to rest. Between all of the mistakes he made, Subaru's disappearance was the one that made him the most guilty. Before that, he'd forced Subaru into many undesirable situations. To think, it was all for one pointless goal. How foolish of him.

He had a lot of time to think about things over the last ten years. The boy's will to give second chances was truly astonishing. The Court Mage could only hope that his sacrifice would help make amends for all he had done.

Ram wished that she'd gotten the chance to be a better sister figure for him. Despite their usual banter having been playful, without much ill intent, she couldn't help but think that it had an adverse effect on his mentality. She wished that she had paid more attention to that. She wished that her caring side had come to light more often, instead of remaining stubborn.

Rem wanted to be remembered, hoping that this, similarly to Ram, would help make up for her past mistakes. Perhaps that was selfish of her, but the maid couldn't help it. She wanted to save her hero, just as he'd saved her so many times in the past. Similarly to Roswaal, she wanted to amend her mistakes from the past.

As they concluded their final thoughts, the Great Spirit had readied herself. Fully prepared, Beatrice uttered a quiet, simple, "UI Abso."

The spell activated immediately after the incantation. Roswaal, Rem and Ram could feel the intense pull of the spell pulling them in, yet they didn't dare fight against it. Rather, they simply closed their eyes and awaited the fate they'd chosen for themselves.

All at once, the three of them were lifted up and forcefully yanked toward the Great Spirit until they collided. Beatrice flinched and stumbled slightly as each of them slowly started to become a part of her, feeling as their individual essence intertwined with her very soul. Along with that, she could feel an incredible amount of additional power... it was almost too much for her to bear.

Rem, the loyal and powerful Oni maid.

Roswaal, the powerful Margrave and Court Mage.

Ram, the next incarnation of the Oni God.

Their souls and power became a part of Beatrice, the Great Spirit of Yin.

When everything was done, the last of their essence having been absorbed into Beatrice's very being, there was a small moment of calm. She stumbled at first and attempted to regain her balance after having been knocked around, but that proved to be futile.

Once the momentary calm ended, the effects of the three's absorption were as immediate as the spell. The Great Spirit couldn't help but yell, falling to her knees and grasping at her head as it exploded in agonizing pain.

As she screamed, her hair began to change. Light streaks of blue and pink began to flow out from her scalp, choosing very few random strands of hair to make their marks. At the same time, her left eye began to throb; a hand quickly moving from her head to her eye, as if it would help remove the pain.

When the streaks in her hair ceased coming, the pain finally began to subside. She removed the hand from her head, phantom pain still lingering as her scalp settled. Her other hand stayed in place over her eye, still feeling it throb underneath.

Beatrice took deep breaths, shakily bringing herself back to her feet while she continuously stumbled over. Grabbing a chair for support, she looked to find the closest reflective surface she could find. Once she found it, she first looked at her hair, though found herself eerily unsurprised by the changes. Then, hesitatingly, she began removing the hand away from her eye.

To her surprise, it hadn't changed yet. On the surface was what remained of her 'normal' eye. Yet, it still throbbed and ached as if it would mutate and change at any given moment. Beatrice opted to keep covering it with her hand, as if she were shielding it from any outside harm.

Her mind went elsewhere, focusing within herself to take notice of what she'd gained. The increase of power she received... it was significant, greatly so. Yes... this would do; this was enough.

Though, as Beatrice looked at her reflection, she felt tempted to cry. Not out of joy, but because she could no longer see the Great Spirit of Yin that contracted Natsuki Subaru, the Hero in everyone's eyes... even her own. In that spirit's place existed a monster; a hideous abomination that needed to be exterminated. She'd even taken away the lives of people he cared about...

She shook her head, getting rid of those thoughts. This would be worth it. *Everything* would be worth it. She was finally there. She could finally accomplish what she set out to do.

Natsuki Subaru could finally return.

WHOOSH!

The moment Beatrice heard it, she raised an arm with the palm facing outward. A barrier quickly formed, shielding her from a shard of ice that would have otherwise pierced her face.

The shield lowered, the shard of ice falling to the ground and breaking apart on impact. The Great Spirit looked back toward the doorway, eyes narrowing at the figure standing within.

She was met with a cold glare back, moderately crazed but so very certainly angry. Beatrice could subtly feel the chill in the room, becoming worse and worse, as the figure slumped closer with each step. Even if the icicle failed to strike her, the glare of the figure in front of her certainly succeeded.

As Beatrice looked into the figure's amethyst eyes, she could feel the intense, chilling anger striking out of them. The figure seethed, fingers clenching in and out but not turning into fists, "*What... did you do.*"

The Great Spirit didn't move, remaining unflinching in her spot. Instead, she glared back at her attacker, "Nothing they didn't ask for, I suppose."

That made the figure even angrier, loudly growling while the floor beneath their feet froze as an aftereffect of their outburst. The dark cloak they wore, which covered everything but their face, began to freeze with it, but the figure quickly regained control of their magic and ceased the effects.

"First... it was Subaru," their cold, feminine voice growled. "Now... *it was all I have left.*"

Beatrice subconsciously backed herself up, sensing the uncontrolled edge in her voice and wishing to avoid unnecessary conflict. She wasn't in the right shape to get into any type of fight and she had other things she wanted — needed — to do.

The Great Spirit softened her glare, yet kept it nonetheless, "It was a means to an end, Emilia. They understood that too. It was why they agreed to help Betty, in fact."

The half-elf, Emilia, was who stood before Beatrice now. Emilia, who used to be a nice, kind-hearted, lovable girl was now a cold, sheltered, broken version of herself. Beatrice could see through her unwelcoming eyes, how lost and alone she truly was... angry at everything that could've led to this very moment.

Unfortunately, the Great Spirit was less than accommodating to her. She had other priorities in mind currently, unwilling to diverge from the given path for anything else at all. Beatrice very well knew that it could lead to provoking the half-elf, but she didn't care. All she cared about was leaving and finally, after all of these painful years, getting her Subaru back.

The voice that used to ring like silver bells, reduced to that of a broken fraction of its former charm, spat out to Beatrice once again, "Why... *why* must this world take away *everything* I hold dear?!"

Beatrice backed away once again, hearing the edge in some of the words that were used, sensing Emilia's rise in hostility. Spears of ice began forming in the air, all aimed at her, which caused the Great Spirit to brace in preparation. For once, Beatrice tried to appeal with the angry half-elf, "You do not understand the gravity of what is going on. Not all hope is lost, in fact!"

But, seeing as though the contorted expression of rage on Emilia's face hadn't changed, it was obvious that she wasn't listening. It almost seemed as though the ends of the spears sharpened, subtly inching forward with a vigorous eagerness to impale themselves into their target.

"You *will* pay. *I promise.*"

Beatrice didn't need any other warning, quickly using her teleportation spell to leave the area just as the spears of ice launched forward and inadvertently struck the ground. The floor cracked and broke as each spear pierced through, the damage spreading to some of the furniture and walls, effectively destroying a good portion of the room.

A few moments passed, Emilia only having taken slow deep breaths. Her arms were outstretched, after having sent her ice spears forward, and her face relaxed in a temporary calm. However, once she finally realized that Beatrice had gotten away, her face sneered and mixed into an unfathomable fury.

She loudly screamed into the air, arms outstretched to her sides and hands enclosed into fists. Emilia clenched her hands so hard that her nails began to dig into her palms, causing them to bleed. The outburst once again caused ice to generate all around her, freezing the encasing entire home and surrounding area in nothing but ice.

When she finally calmed down, an entire minute had passed. Emilia declined into only taking deep breaths, relaxing herself as best as she could. This wasn't because she was beginning to calm down; no, it was because she gained more focus. She focused her mind, her rage, on one person. One singular individual that she believed to be responsible for everything leading up to this.

It all made sense, didn't it? The half-elf laughed to herself in a more maniacal and intermittent manner, her broken, crazed state making itself continuously prominent. She planned to make do on her threat... no, her *promise*.

She knew what she had to do.

Meanwhile, Beatrice had reappeared back at the mansion. She was barely able to steady herself, leaning against the bedframe of the room she'd teleported into. Her eye still throbbed and ached, but it was bearable.

There was no need to delay things any longer, reaching into her dress and pulling out the very thing that stood between contractor and spirit. The Seal of Eternity.

She held the stone within her palm, looking at it almost mesmerizingly, the unnatural light shining off of it captivating her gaze. Ever since he — Subaru — disappeared, she hadn't once left it behind. Never had she taken it off her person. If she had, it would've felt like leaving him behind, too.

Her thumb gently grazed the surface of the stone, almost hesitantly. The Great Spirit shook her head, trying to snap out of it. What was she hesitating for? This was what she worked so hard to do! This moment right here!

After a while of staring into the small, yet heavy, stone tablet in her palm, she came to realize that she was scared. Scared of what would become of everything that used to be. Would he be different? What would he say, think, do...? Then... What of the Witch?

Beatrice shook her head again, her expression hardening into one of settling resolve. No, none of those things mattered. Even if he changed — even if he didn't like her anymore after all she's done — she would still love him anyway. He was Betty's Subaru, after all. As his contracted spirit, it was only right that she accept *any* aspect of his, different or not.

As for the Witch... the Great Spirit would deal with her when the time came. Once everything was done, the Witch would be promptly eliminated for causing this catastrophe to happen in the first place.

Nodded to herself in a sense of self-confirmation, Beatrice narrowed her eyes down at the stone in her palm. Then, without further delay, her thumb swiped across the glowing symbol, the light shining just as bright as when he first left...

~Present Day~

"You saw her. Tell me *where*."

In the dead of night, the sharp, cold voice cut through the air as if it were butter. The person it was directed to was just an ordinary man, forcefully held up against an alleyway wall by a being with above-average strength.

Despite how dark it was outside, the man could see the girl's features clearly. More specifically, it was a half-elf... the very same one that had seemingly disappeared ten years ago. She'd suddenly appeared out of seemingly nowhere, throwing him against the wall and asking questions he didn't understand the significance of.

"I-I saw her at the s-statue with three other p-people," the man stuttered out, too afraid for his life to give any solid reply.

The force against his body only worsened, making him feel as though it would be crushed under the extreme pressure. The girl holding him hostage sneered, angrily pulling him back before slamming him against the wall once more, "*After that! Where did they go?!*"

The man yelled out in pain, but nobody was around to hear him, much less help. He took rapid, deep breaths as he tried to find his words. Answering her questions was the only way he could survive, "I-I don't know for sure! I j-just know that there was a g-girl with reddish-brown hair! I c-couldn't see the o-other two! P-Please let me go!"

As the man begged, the half-elf lost herself within her own mind. The description of the girl he spoke of was not lost on her, easily remembering someone she used to know who fit it perfectly. The half-elf thought it to be common sense.

Who else would *she* be with, if it weren't someone she already knew?

With that concluded, her mind had wandered to the man's other detail. What exactly did he say, again? *She* visited Subaru's *memorial statue*?

At that, she actually scoffed. As if *she* had any right to visit something as special as that, after all *she's done*.

Surprisingly, her grip on the man loosened. His feet hit the ground momentarily after, which similarly shocked him. He was somewhat stable and able to walk, looking scaredly at the half-elf in front of him for some type of sign or confirmation. A shiver ran down his spine when he saw her giving him an eerily, uncomfortably sweet smile.

"Thank you," she said with a fake, empty appreciation. Her arms, almost gently, reached out and patted the sides of his shoulders. The man was infinitely more uncomfortable with the situation, stiffening in place as the half-elf lowered her arms. She tilted her head, getting slightly closer to him, continuing with a cold, chilling whisper, "*Speak nothing of this meeting.*"

The man vigorously nodded, recognizing the threat on his life, as her head backed away. After that, he booked it out of the alley without looking back. The half-elf watched him run, stumbling and, at times, tripping his way out of sight. Only then did her eyes direct themselves elsewhere; more specifically, right up into the sky.

She was getting closer. Oh, so much closer. The promise she made would be fulfilled and then...

She giggled, a hand and gently putting fingers to her lips, the thought of what would happen next appeasing her greatly.

... she would get Subaru back herself.

The night became chillier, and certain people felt it a lot more than others.

At once, two bodies hit the floor. Neither were conscious, both lying asleep in whatever positions they'd fallen in.

"There you go," the current Queen of Lugnica — Felt — commented, turning around to face the two people standing closely behind her. One wore an identity concealing robe, while the other wore the same sans the hood. "Two Archbishops, just for you."

The one without a hood — Subaru — looked at her with grateful eyes, "I really can't express how much I appreciate you for doing this for us."

Felt shrugged, waving a hand from side to side in a dismissing manner, "Eh. I don't really need your thanks, anyway." She put her hand down, looking at him dead in the eyes, "In all honesty, I feel like we're the ones that should be thanking and appreciating you. We really owe you a lot."

Subaru felt a pit open up within him at her admission. That wasn't exactly something he wanted to hear, mainly because he didn't agree with it.

Before he had much chance to argue back, Felt proceeded to walk past him and the hooded individual beside him — Pandora. She walked up to a doorway, one which provided an exit to the cell they currently resided in. She spoke again, "Be careful with them. If they start to wake up, either knock them back out or call me so I can reseal them."

Subaru nodded, about to turn away from her but stopping short as a question popped into his mind. Turning back to Felt before she could close the door, he asked, "I forgot to ask earlier, but... why are these guys still alive, anyway? I thought you would've executed them by now."

Felt similarly halted her motions, looking back at him with an expression feigning hesitation. Her eyes trailed to the ground, thinking for a few moments, before meeting his face again. "Well... after you disappeared and we were told you were dead, since information was so scarce, we thought that they..." she used a hand to gesture to the two Archbishops behind them, "might have an answer as to what could've happened."

Subaru nodded, understanding what she said and meant. It was really unfortunate that such a miscommunication even happened. He didn't know for certain, but even just a little more information — even just knowing he wasn't dead — could have saved everyone from at least some of their turmoil.

"So, we brought them out of their separate seals and interrogated them for a while," Felt continued, grabbing his attention again. "Most of them were done by Reinhard himself. He thought that you were too stubborn to die," she half-heartedly laughed at that, mumbling something to herself that Subaru couldn't hear. "In short, we basically found out that they didn't know shit and just decided to seal them away again to be on the safe side."

Once again, Subaru nodded. "Thanks again for helping us with this. I know it couldn't have been easy for you," he said.

"Pssh. It's no big deal," she waved a hand in dismissal again. Before long, her hand dropped and her eyes gazed upon him more seriously. "Just remember what I said. If they wake up, *call me*."

With that, she shut the door to the cell, effectively giving all four occupants in the room some form of privacy. Subaru and Pandora turned around to look upon the two Archbishops that lay motionless on the ground. Aside from their steady breathing, one could assume that they were dead.

Sirius: The Archbishop of Wrath.

Roy Alphard: The Archbishop of Gluttony.

As Subaru's words were before, this event wasn't exactly simple or easy to put together. Felt in particular had to argue with a *lot* of people for them to even allow her into the dungeon alone with only him and Pandora, who to them are unknown individuals.

Not only that, but when she mentioned the Archbishops, many people ended up flipping their lid. No surprise that people would freak out about letting two dangerous Archbishops out of their confinement.

In the end, Felt had basically ordered, or rather demanded, them to let her do as she wished. Begrudgingly, they obliged. In addition, she warned them against sending any spies or knights to follow after. He was sure that they complied, given their terrified faces when the three of them left.

Subaru's eyes narrowed, gazing down upon the foes he was once forced to face. Felt was trusting him here. She put faith in him to keep her safe and do what he needed to do without any complications. He would make sure that this trust and faith was not misplaced.

"They seem rather comfortable, no?" Pandora weirdly commented, triggering him to take his attention out of his own mind.

Subaru blinked a few times to focus his thoughts better, glancing over to Pandora. He may not be able to see her face nor her expression, but he knew enough of what she was feeling.

Guilt. Shame. Regret.

He knew why, too. Subaru was not naive to what she had done in the past, for she had once told him of everything during their imprisonment together. Even so, in the end, he'd accepted her wrongdoings and chose to see the good within her. He encouraged her to take hold of that good and it eventually grew into what it was now.

The fact that she felt this way upon seeing Sirius proved his point. She felt remorse, guilty over something she'd done wrong in the past. It was clear to him that if she could change things, she would.

Subaru was also aware that her comment was an attempt at a distraction. Pandora wished to help take her mind off of those feelings, not wanting them to hold her back during a time in which important events were taking place. Not only could Third Shift tell him this, but he also had a deep understanding with that type of mindset.

Truly, they were very much alike.

In the end, he decided to go along with it. Lightening the mood was a good thing, and, if it meant helping Pandora too, he didn't mind at all.

Subaru tilted his head, studying them just a little bit. With her earlier comment running through his head, he had to hold back a laugh. In context, it was funny. Their positions weren't exactly the best for sleeping, to say the least..

"Well, they sure do seem relaxed enough. At least they're not clinging to one another, or something," he responded back. Pandora did not miss the reference in his statement.

"Perhaps our situation was one of a kind," she simply said back, as if it were a fact rather than an alternative proposition. Subaru couldn't help but smile a little at that; after all, he sure hoped that was the case. Pandora stepped closer to the Archbishops, kneeling between both of their unconscious forms before looking back toward her beloved, "Shall we begin?"

Subaru stepped closer as well, though a bit unsure, "So, we're just going to kill them?"

"Yes," she confirmed with a single word. He was sure that one of the main reasons for that was because of her internal feelings about Sirius. Specifically, the guilt continuously ate away at the former Witch from within.

"We're completely sure that Sirius won't cause any issues with this, right?" Subaru questioned, the primary concern regarding his uncertainty coming to light. He needed to ensure that the Authority of Wrath would not have any prominent effects if he were to harm Sirius in any way.

She shook her head, "It should not. She is unconscious, so it should not be active as such."

He only nodded. Pandora saying "should not" wasn't exactly a confirmation, but he supposed that he'd have to take it. In a worst case scenario, he would need to use Return by Death, he supposed. There was no other way for him to get the Wrath Witch Factor other than killing her, so...

Suddenly, he began to feel lightheaded, which Pandora quickly took notice of. She gave him an odd, concerned look as he momentarily stumbled in place, putting a hand to his head instinctively as if it would help.

Subaru felt incredibly odd, to say the least. He could hear a whisper in his ears, while his head slowly began to throb and a feeling, an unnatural one at that, swelled within his chest. In a way, he recognized that feeling. It was familiar to him, closely resembling two other feelings he possessed.

However, this one in particular seemed to call out to him. In this moment, it was as if the Witch Factor itself was speaking to him...

The whispers in his ears became more understandable to Subaru. A female voice, doing its best to speak itself clearly. It wasn't malicious or evil, but rather guiding and kind, encouraging even, as she advised him on what to do next.

Subaru found himself listening, his body beginning to move in ordinance to her words. Pandora looked at him concerningly, ready to step in and help if necessary. Though, as she watched him, she opted to let him be.

An arm slightly outstretched as he further approached Sirius, kneeling down to better let his hand gently rest upon her. As it did so, he internally called out to and embraced the Authority that wished to be used.

His mind became overwhelmed with information at that moment. It almost felt as if his head would explode under the immense pressure it felt. In his head, he compared it to seeing her entire internal body structure, able to look into her body, mind and soul.

Everything was a mess, he knew that right away. The first things that flooded his senses were her injuries and scars, tallied all across her entire body in various different places. Her mind was also in shambles, broken and destroyed... a fragment of what it once was.

Then, there was the anomaly. A completely unnatural form resonating from within Sirius, at the very center of it all, binded and connected to her very soul and being. Right then, something compelled him to just... remove it; to rid her of the unnatural presences from within.

It was as if he took a pair of tweezers and plucked it out. He could immediately feel the uncomfortableness of the new Witch Factor entering him, bouncing around as if it were lost and confused, or even afraid of any possible dangers lurking nearby, before settling down.

Subaru's soon lost track of that, beginning to focus on other details regarding Sirius' condition. Her mind was shattered, the pieces scattered and lost... but he felt compelled to fix it. One by one, he started picking up the pieces and putting them back together again.

After that were the scars that remained. When Subaru willed it so, it was as if a calm, gentle wave flowed over the Archbishop's body. The wave cleaned each of the scars by fading them out, all in one fell swoop. Now, very little of their presence remained.

Sirius had been restored to her natural and healthy state. Her soul had been healed and cleansed of anything, and everything, unnatural.

"Natural State"... it felt like a fitting name for such an ability, Subaru thought.

The whispers seemed happy and satisfied, quieting in Subaru's ear as his mind recentered itself. He first looked down at his hands, noticing nothing different about them yet still feeling a strange tingle. A part of him questioned what he'd just done, looking to the side to see Pandora's awed and amazed expression.

"Baru... are you okay?" she asked him, her body steadily shuffling closer to his own. Once close enough, she gently rested her hands atop his arm in a comforting way.

He nodded, at the same time saying, "I think so." In truth, he was still a bit dazed, unsure as to what exactly he'd just done.

"How do you feel?" she inquired again, her head moving over just a little so that she could better see his face.

He took a deep breath, before letting it back out. He made sure to take some time to evaluate his own condition, too. As Subaru did so, he quickly became aware of how unusually fatigued he now felt. Relaying that to her, he said, "I feel... tired, more than anything. Like all of my energy just got zapped away."

Pandora couldn't help but hold onto him just a little more, after hearing that. She wanted to make sure he felt comfortable, even if just a little bit, which he greatly appreciated. In a way, he could already start feeling his energy coming back.

Unnoticed by the both of them, having been too preoccupied by each other, something twitched in the room. Then, again. A pair of eyes groggily began to open themselves, blinking a few times as they awoke from a deep slumber.

Suddenly, a loud gasp followed soon thereafter, finally garnering the couple's attention. Subaru jumped slightly, but didn't back away. In fact, he displayed an active readiness to defend himself if at all necessary.

Pandora was very much similar. While she didn't back away, she also displayed a preparation to lunge forward and attack, if she needed to. A part of her, at first, didn't know exactly why she reacted that way, but it wasn't too hard for her to figure out. She was simply very protective of her beloved. If any harm came to him...

An arm reached in front of her, preventing her from moving forward anymore. Pandora could feel herself come back to reality after the sudden contact, realizing quickly that she'd spaced out and, when she looked down, had been unconsciously moving. Her head shifted to the side, looking directly at Subaru.

Without wasting time, he told her, "You were making that face again... and I could feel what you were feeling."

"Oh," she uttered simply, taking a moment to think to herself. She'd momentarily forgotten about Third Shift's ability to share feelings, along with physical contact. She nodded to him, "Thank you... for pulling me back."

Subaru only smiled at her, letting it convey his message to her. Needless to say, she received it loud and clear. It was just so heartwarming and sweet. Pandora couldn't help but let herself smile, too. Seeing his smile just brought those kinds of feelings out of her. Nobody else could do that.

She didn't know what she'd do without him anymore.

Movement from the side once again brought their focus back to the situation. Their heads snapped to the now awake figure at their side. Sirius, the Archbishop of Wrath, had woken up.

The movement they'd previously seen had been Sirius herself, having corrected her position on the ground to sit more comfortably. She quickly moved her arms in front of her face, looking at them from the front and back in what seemed like desperation.

At the sight of the bandages, it was clear that she'd become panicked. She immediately began clawing away at them, desperately ripping them off of her arms and hands to reveal almost flawless looking skin underneath.

After doing that for around a full minute, despite it having felt much longer, she attempted to feel her face. It was obvious that her breath had become shakier, a light gasp of shock or surprise additionally escaping from her lips while she quickly clawed away at those bandages, too.

Subaru gaped at the sight before him, utterly shocked at what he was seeing. When he noticed that Sirius had woken up, he'd expected something different but... not exactly like this.

His eyes glanced at Pandora, seeing that her mouth slightly agape as well. Through their connection, he could tell that she was beginning to feel some semblance of hope arise inside of her, along with other various emotions.

Sirius had finished tearing the bandages off of her face, letting her hand finally grace the skin and ultimately revealing it for everyone in the room to see. It looked and felt

good, being perfectly healthy and smooth. When her hands lowered, her eyes frantically darted around the room, eventually having landed on both Subaru and Pandora.

Finally having properly noticed them, she jolted and inched herself backward. Unfortunately for her, she didn't get too far, having quickly hit the wall. Sirius inhaled deep breaths, eyes darting around the duo's immediate vicinity in a further indication of panic. Subaru could easily tell that she was scared.

As Sirius caught her breath as best as she could, she rapidly fired off a few questions, "Who are you? Where am I? What is this place?"

Her head tilted from side to side, looking up and even down to try and gain some semblance of familiarity in her current location. It was clear that she was clueless on a great many things.

Subaru put his hands up, trying to convey that he meant no harm or hostility, "It's okay... it's okay." He began to move himself slightly closer to her, continuing to speak as calmly as possible, "My name is Natsuki Subaru," he used one of his hands to gesture to Pandora at his side, "and this is... my friend. Can you tell us your name?"

She took more breaths, shaking her head once or twice before refocusing her gaze on him. Her eyes shifted to Pandora for a second, but ultimately landed on him once again while she answered the question, "My... My name is Fortuna. I'm from Elier Forest. How... How did I get here?"

Subaru internally felt an intense wave of surprise hit him. When he used his Authority of Lust, newly named Natural State, he hadn't known what to exactly expect. But, as of right now, the facts were clear.

He'd brought Sirius back to her original, sane self. He'd brought back Fortuna.

He also felt the slightest bit relieved. From the tone of Fortuna's response, in conjunction to her expressions and movements, he could tell that she was starting to trust them, even by just a small bit.

Hesitation swelled within him, fearing that he'd frighten her if he mentioned anything too drastic. For this reason, he opted to wait just a little longer to tell her some of the things that were going on. There was still something he wanted to confirm, so he asked, "What's the last thing you remember? Can you tell me?"

"I..." she faltered, her head tilting down and slightly shaking as she struggled to recall her last memories. "I was in Elier," she finally started, looking back up at him, sometimes glancing to Pandora as well, as she continued. "Pandora attacked because she wanted to open the seal... I was protecting Emilia... I..."

She held her head, clearly struggling to recall the memories she wished to retrieve. Subaru's expression softened at the sight, feeling bad for the woman. Ultimately, he was happy that he'd brought her back but... she was still suffering.

"How..." Both Subaru and Fortuna perked up at the sudden comment. They respectively moved their heads to face the speaker, only to discover that it had come from the hooded, identity concealed Pandora. Her mouth was slightly agape, shaking her head in small motions in what seemed like denial, "How is this... I never believed that..."

She trailed off, her head motioning downward to stare at her feet. Subaru could sense the influx of emotions through their connection. He felt the need to go to her, hug her and tell her that everything was okay.

He wanted to tell Pandora that he was there for her, that she didn't need to feel sad, guilty and ashamed of herself. The urge grew, his desperation in wanting to do so becoming increasingly more prominent.

However, in the end, he chose not to act on these urges, despite how much it pained him. Internally, he knew that it was best for her to digest what was happening on her own, at least for the time being. Though he'd be at her side in an instant, when the time came.

"I am sorry..." she mumbled in a light tone, her posture visibly slumping as if she'd fall to her knees at any moment. Subaru's expression momentarily faltered, not having expected her to say those words. Again, she uttered the same line, "I am sorry."

The elf was surprised and confused, for the most part. She didn't know how to react, or what to even say. As far as Fortuna knew, the girl in front of her was someone she'd just met. What need would she have to apologize?

Fortuna had little to no words for the situation, unsure as to what she should even be thinking. Everything around her was just so... bizarre, unusual and even outright confusing. She didn't know what was going on at all, nor did she even know where she was.

That was why, when Fortuna watched the girl apologize, she was confused but all the more desperate for answers. If this girl had something to do with everything, she wanted to know.

"I... I don't know why you're apologizing, but can one of you please tell me what's going on?" she asked once more, her light yet increasingly edged tone prominently conveyed.

Subaru, meanwhile, now had all of his focus on Pandora. He had heard and registered the elf's question, but Pandora was his current concern. The more he looked at her, watching as she wobbled in place with her head guiltily tilted down, the more he wanted to rush to her side.

He almost did, too... but stopped himself when a sudden pit opened itself within him. It was an odd, somewhat terrible feeling that completely overtook his mind.

His head began to ring, but not in a way that hurt him. In a way, he could feel as his senses honed. Subaru noticed how his sense of hearing changed, registering sound more distinctively... more selectively. His focus centered itself, framing only on the feeling that ran through his core into his mind.

It felt as though things were very, very wrong. It felt as though something terrible was about to happen.

Then, as if on cue, the feeling became even worse. His body seemingly tingled at the sensation, his hairs sticking up as if he had a chill. His eyes widened, every part of his body filling with an intense, screaming urge to move aside and *fast*.

Without hesitation, he listened to it.

Subaru acted on his instincts alone in that moment, ducking his head and moving to his right in one quick motion. Just in time, he managed to dodge a fast moving figure that would've presumably taken off his head had he not moved at all. Pandora and Fortuna, who'd both been distracted, watched what just happened with a mix of awe and shock.

Subaru moved himself next to Pandora, stopping in his movements and narrowing his eyes as the figure skid to a halt as well. Pandora and Fortuna looked at him for a second before bringing their full attention to the only hostile entity in the room.

The figure snickered in a clear, deep, masculine tone. As everything settled and their eyes adjusted, they could all clearly see his face. At the mischievous, sharp-toothed smile he gave, it was obvious that he found this situation amusing.

"Natsuki Subaru," Roy Alphard began, his voice laying the start of a sinister undertone. Subaru hardly flinched when his name was said, instead hardening his stance and

preparing himself for a fight. "I wonder what would happen if I ate your name, tsu~!"

It would be a lie to say that Subaru felt nothing at the declaration. He was a bit shaken up, knowing full well what having one's name eaten could do to a person and their life. There was absolutely no desire in him to let that fate come to pass. Though, that didn't mean he wasn't at least a bit shaken at the threat.

One slip up and his life could be over. Just like that.

Roy launched himself forward in an instant, his arms outstretched and aiming directly for Subaru. Subaru could feel the intense dread, the feeling of danger, scream in his head, heart and core once again. His body felt the subconscious need to move, triggering his instincts into preparing his own attack in the form of his Helping Hands.

However, it would seem as though he didn't need to do anything at all.

The feeling within him ceased immediately once Pandora, who'd just a second ago been at his side, sprung forward with a sudden unrivaled speed. Before Roy could fully reach his target, only having gotten around halfway, Pandora completely halted his attack.

Her palms pressed against the sides of his face, her fingers gripping into the side of his head as she marginally began lifting him up. By the way her fingers were bent and how much they shook, it was clear that her hold on him was tight. Very, very tight.

Subaru could do nothing but watch as this happened, watching as Roy's mischievous eyes widened in an immense sense of fear. To say that Subaru was shocked would be an understatement. On the side, Fortuna wasn't faring much better.

Roy was starting to be lowered down, giving Subaru some hope that Pandora was about to stop whatever it was that she was doing.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The lower the Archbishop went, the tighter she squeezed. Soon enough his body lowered past her neck, then past her chest. She slumped forward a little as continued to squeeze, her face almost completely blank as she continuously kept up the pressure.

It was the continuous cracks and pops of the Archbishop's skull that finally snapped Subaru out of his dazed trance. Subaru's eyes widened, his body moving on its own while a hand physically reached out to her. At the same time, one simple call left his mouth, "Dora, no!"

It was as if his words flicked a switch in her head, Pandora's eyes widening as a sudden realization hit her head-on. However, despite that, her hands moved themselves in such a quick, sudden motion that it took Roy's head along with them.

The resulting force of the movement caused the Archbishop's head to spin completely around, a loud snapping sound echoing within the room. Pandora quickly backed away, her hands separating from his head which allowed his body to fall to the ground with an audible thump.

Roy's head was completely backward, the physical indents on the side of his face additionally indicating to his crushed skull. His spine was sticking out of his neck, providing a sickening sight as blood occasionally sprayed from the wound onto the wall and floor.

Subaru's eyes could only hauntingly follow Roy's body as it fell to the ground. Even afterwards, he could merely only continue to stare, feeling just a bit uneasy and sick.

After some time he buried those feelings deep inside of him, his eyes finally moving to look at Pandora directly. They didn't give her a hard look. Instead, they were rather soft, questioning and most of all disappointed.

"Why'd you do that..." he trailed off his question, his expression shifted in a way that showed his discomfort. The disappointment he felt was laid clearly in his tone, plenty for her to take notice.

"I-I..." Pandora attempted to speak, an uncharacteristic stutter escaping from her lips.

She angled her head down, bringing her palms up so that her eyes may look at them. They weren't shaking: they were incredibly still. It quickly became apparent to her that, on the inside, she *wanted* to do this. She *wanted* to kill him. She'd done this on purpose.

It was easy for her to find the reason. That was why, without hesitation, she gathered her words and answered, "He threatened you."

When her tone solidified itself, stating her answer with certainty, he didn't exactly know what to think. He wasn't scared, but he was worried. If she snapped because of something as meager as a threat, then the possibility of her snapping for anything else was there, too.

He remembered everything that happened before this. Her blank faces... the times where she'd freeze or zone out for seemingly no apparent reason. Due to that, he'd been worried about this exact type of situation happening. Now, it appeared as though his worries and fears were proven correct.

Subaru knew that he couldn't allow this to keep going any longer. He needed to start actively pushing against it; he needed to further encourage her to stop feeling so protective of him.

He shook his head, his expression still soft yet imposingly judging — she could feel it, too. An arm extended, gesturing to Roy's body as he said, "That doesn't mean killing him was necessary."

Pandora was actually shocked to hear him say that. A part of her internally flinched at the statement, knowing full well that what she did was morally wrong and that her beloved was disappointed in her. The latter in particular made her feel especially awful, not wanting him to be mad at her. However, another part of her thought that what she did was right and perfectly justifiable.

Both sides clashed and fought against one another, neither willing to submit to the other. But that didn't mean there were no victors. Pandora's mind stuck to her justifiable actions, choosing to argue against Subaru's protest in favor of the greater good, in her eyes, "Would you rather us have risked something else happening?"

Subaru was momentarily appalled at what he was hearing. He hadn't expected a response like that, unable to properly believe that she was choosing to fight with him over this. Her defensive and agitated emotions were obvious in her tone of voice, further showing him that Pandora had no intention of backing down just yet.

Internally, he sighed. He was tired, both mentally and physically, but if she was going to argue about this, like hell he was going to back down. Subaru knew what was right and what was wrong; he knew that she was losing her way over it.

He decided to retort back, a solid tone of confidence emerging as he spoke, "I'm sure we could have prevented anything bad from happening."

"What if he succeeded in eating your name?!" she fired back, having surprisingly begun to raise her voice. "What would you have done then?!"

"He wouldn't have!" he ferociously denied. "I wouldn't have let him!"

"Because he would have killed you first? Is that it?" Pandora quickly argued against his response, shockingly without much hesitation at all.

Subaru was momentarily stunned. He didn't think she'd say something like that, but that didn't stop him from saying something back: "I can take care of myself, Dora! You don't need to protect me by doing things like *this*!"

He once again made a gesture to the Archbishop's corpse, doing his best to signify how *wrong* it was. His voice raised itself, conveying his internal anger and frustration through the words he spoke. Subaru just desperately wanted the message to get across to her.

He wanted to bring the Dora he knew back to the light, not let her fall back into the pit of darkness. Letting her fall meant bringing the old version of her back, and like hell would he ever let that happen.

She brought her hands to her head, shaking it in a show of her own frustration before throwing her arms back down to the side. She gave him a hard look, saying with a brokenly stern voice, "I do not know what I would do if I ever lost you."

Silence followed.

Subaru had nothing to say in response to that. Her confession shocked him, yet at the same time it also didn't. Some parts of him felt confused, but he also seemed to understand what she meant.

Despite these feelings, he could read the atmosphere of the room. Having detected her change in tone, along with the conveyed feelings through her words, it was clear that she was passionate about this. He did not want to interrupt what she had to say.

"You have become my everything," she sincerely stated, looking at him with almost pleading-like eyes. A hand even grasped at her heart, speaking as if she took the words directly from it, "You are what holds me down. You are what keeps me together. I love you with every part of my being. If I ever lost you... I would be lost. I cannot bear the thought of that ever happening. I will not let it have the slightest chance to occur."

Subaru's own breath shook at that, feeling the weight of her words crash upon his shoulders. He was touched by her words, truly flattered by the extent of her feelings for him. But, he also understood her worries and knew the implications of what it all meant.

He took a deep breath, gathering all of his thoughts together before giving them to her, "You know that I love you too, Dora. I... I understand what you're saying, but this," he made one, final gesture to Roy's body, "is not the way to go about it." He gave her a soft, understanding and caring look, "We can find other ways to solve a problem without having to kill people."

Pandora shook her head, as if denying his persistence, "What would you have supposed we do instead?"

This time, he gestured to Fortuna, who had been silently watching their argument the entire time. Her expression was more confused than anything, still having absolutely no idea of what to think about anything that was happening. The dynamics and opposing ideals between the two individuals in front of her only served to further send Fortuna's mind into a spiral.

"You saw what I did for her. I brought her back; I fixed her mind. I could have done the same for him too, Dora," he insisted.

"You told me that you were tired... that you did not have any energy left because of what you did," Pandora shook her head once again in a firm stance of denial. "You do not know if it would have worked."

Subaru let out a breath, his expression unwaveringly stubborn and confident, yet soft and refined. What she said wasn't untrue. In fact, he still felt as though his energy was nonexistent. The only reason he was able to move so actively was because of his passion for the situation currently at hand.

It was very possible that, due to his current unenergized condition, Natural State wouldn't have worked. The Authority is what made him feel that way in the first place, after all. If he tried to use it again, who knows what could've happened.

In addition, he didn't even know how the ability worked. His knowledge was basic, at best. He knew that it was capable of healing and repairing the minds of broken individuals, anything specific beyond that was unknown to him.

There were a lot of unknowns, many of which could have led to any type of disaster. Despite those facts, it didn't stop him from rebutting her denial, "But I could've still tried."

Finally, she averted her gaze. She had nothing to say in response to that, choosing to curl her arms inward and hug herself. The only other thing he got from her was a slight, single nod of acknowledgment.

Subaru could feel the inner turmoil within her. Pandora didn't want to look at him, nor did she even want to face Roy's corpse.

His eyes glanced downward, looking at Roy's body for himself one last time. He wasn't fazed by it too much anymore, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of dread and regret upon seeing it.

A part of his mind thought that this could've been prevented had he just acted sooner — it could've been stopped if he'd just gone to her, helped her and held her. Subaru couldn't help but blame himself.

"What..." a light mumble made itself prominent within the room, quickly taking the couple's attention away from their own individual issues.

The two's eyes tracked to the same place: Fortuna, who still sat still on the ground. Only, this time, something was different. Her head, once lowered, raised itself so that her eyes could stare directly at Pandora. Subaru didn't like the look she was giving, not at all.

"What... What did you say your name was?"

Her tone was particularly icy, edged and laced with immense suspicion. They'd been careless during their argument, shouting their little nicknames as if they'd been alone. Since Fortuna's mind was still wrapped up in Pandora's attack on Eltor Forest, it would be very easy for her to make certain assumptions right about now.

Subaru became more and more worried, his eyes carrying themselves between both Pandora and Fortuna. The tension in the air was thick and Subaru was admittedly afraid of another fight happening breaking loose.

His eyes stuck to Pandora, carefully studying her. She hadn't moved at all, her head and eyes glued to the same place as if she'd just completely ignored Fortuna's question entirely.

The feigned ignorance did little to help, only further fueling Fortuna's increasing paranoia. The elf narrowed her eyes, other emotions mixing with her anger and conveyed through her expression. Subaru was seconds away from interfering, now knowing full well what could happen if he didn't.

Luckily, he didn't even have to. The handle of the door behind him turned from the other side, effectively saving him from a potentially ugly situation. Pandora and Fortuna's eyes readily snapped toward it, prepared for whatever may come through. Subaru, on the other hand, couldn't help but let out a breath in relief, knowing who it was.

"Alright, it's been a while so I'm just- OH MY FUCKING OD WHY IS HIS HEAD BACKWARDS?!"

Felt had come through the door with her usual snarky and carefree attitude, as per her nature. Then... she saw Roy's body, instinctively freaking out and even flinching back a bit.

Recomposing herself quickly, her eyes immediately shot to Subaru for answers. However, Felt quickly noticed a third, very awake, figure in the room. She pointed accusingly at Fortuna, her eyes looking back and forth between the elf and Subaru as she sternly questioned, "And *why* is she *awake*?!"

Fortuna, in response to everything happening, started to completely lose it. Eventually, she too began to yell, "What is going on?! Who are you, how did I get here?! What is this place?!"

Felt went on edge and seemed ready to fight. Subaru defensively put up his hands, swiping them aside as if to metaphorically, or literally, clear the tension in the air, "Look, this can all be explained... *calmly*."

To his insistence, everyone ended up backing down, whether they wanted to or not. Felt had done so first, trusting Subaru's words, and almost snarkily tilted her head at Fortuna to do the same. Hesitantly, the elf followed suit.

What followed next was, fortunately, a rather calm situation. Subaru had quickly explained, in very bare terms, what had happened. Specifically and abundantly, he clarified that Sirius, now Fortuna, was not the Archbishop she used to be, along with the fact that she possessed no such memories of that time. Luckily, Felt trusted him enough to believe it at face value and didn't delve deeper into the hows and whys.

After that, Felt had approached Fortuna in a, surprisingly, relatively friendly way and introduced herself in a surprisingly formal manner. When Felt outright said that she was the current Queen of Lugnica, Fortuna thought it was a blatant lie.

However, the following professionalism of the situation began proving her doubts wrong. After having been asked to similarly introduce herself and provide more information on her background, Felt had gone into great detail on the types of rehabilitation she could provide. She offered the elf a lot of things that simply could not be refused, given her predicament.

Subaru was a bit bewildered at seeing Felt's professional side. Actually, he believed that he'd never really seen it before now. He internally smiled, proud of how much Felt grew over the years.

Though, as her conversation with Fortuna came to a close, she reverted back to her normally carefree self. She led Fortuna to the door, giving Subaru an odd look once she reached it, "I'm pretty sure you have somewhere to be, and you're running late. You know the way out of here. I made sure to spread word to the guards earlier too, so you shouldn't be bothered."

At that, he was a little confused. He hasn't expected Felt to just... shoo him out. Though, still, he had to ask, "Wait- What about him?"

She tilted her head at first, but soon realized what he was gesturing to. Felt did her, now seemingly signature, wave of dismissal, "Don't worry about it. I'll send some guards down to dispose of it later. We were probably going to execute him at some point, anyway."

While she shrugged, Subaru asked another question, "Well... Are you sure you don't need any help?"

She rolled her eyes, "Yes, I'm sure. You should *get going*." Subaru sighed, knowing full well that Felt was trying to rush him out. Though, surprisingly, before she walked out, her expression and behavior suddenly became coy. She looked back at him, "But... you will come back, right?"

Subaru repressed the urge to chuckle, amused at Felt's almost tsundere-like behavior. He did allow himself to smile though, "Yes, of course I'm coming back."

Felt smiled too, genuinely happy to hear his answer, "Good, because Reinhard is on his way too and he's bringing your friends." Subaru's eyes widened in shock at hearing that. A part of him hadn't actually expected her to call them back, especially when the country was in the middle of an important war. She continued, "He seemed... very eager, after I told him the news. Expect him to be here in the day, sometime."

Subaru had to blink a few times to snap himself out of his dazed state. Well... it seemed as though he'd be meeting more of his friends again soon. Despite it not having been ordered under the best of circumstances, he couldn't help but be glad at the fact they were coming back. It was something he was actually looking forward to.

Felt left soon after that, having given both him and Pandora a simple goodbye before stepping out of the room and motioning for Fortuna to follow. Subaru gave Fortuna a small, simple wave which she hesitantly returned, nervously proceeding to follow Felt out of the chamber.

His eyes watched them leave, silently wondering what would happen next for Fortuna. He genuinely hoped that Felt and the others, such as Julius, could help her get back on the right track.

Speaking of Julius, Subaru couldn't help but wonder about him, too. He hadn't seen the former Finest Knight all morning. Though, in the end, he'd shrugged the thought away. Wherever Julius was, Subaru was sure that he was fine.

In any case, Felt had been correct in saying that they were running late. He and Pandora were supposed to be meeting up with Petra, Beatrice and Louis soon and if they intended to make their scheduled time, they needed to leave as soon as possible.

Subaru turned his head to the side, choosing to look at Pandora. She'd been silent and unmoving the entire time, even as Felt came and left. It worried him, with his concern only increasing the longer his gaze stuck to her. Her head kept itself angled down, indicating her downcast mood to great effect.

Through their connection in Third Shift, he knew that her feelings ran a lot deeper than that. He realized and knew that her mind and heart were essentially twisting themselves, but in what way specifically he wasn't entirely positive. Either way, Subaru knew that he needed to help her.

He went to her, not hesitating to reach out his arms and wrap them around her in a nice, snug and securing hug. Subaru could feel her perk up at first, as if she were surprised at the action, before eventually easing herself into relaxation.

Her arms curled up in front of her, wrapping themselves around his own arm. She tries to pull it toward her, as if to make his hold even closer. Pandora tried to bury her face into his arm, but only got as far as burying her mouth. Subaru gently pressed his head atop hers, both of them closing their eyes and letting themselves succumb to the calming atmosphere they created.

In that moment, nothing else mattered to them. The fact that they were running late? Not a priority. Their location? While it certainly wasn't ideal and could have been better, they didn't care. All that mattered was their time together, focusing only on what the other thought and felt.

After a while, when they finally decided to separate, no time was wasted in joining their hands. Immediately, his left hand and her right came together, intertwining their fingers just as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Then, together, they left.

"C'mon Pet! What's the surpr~ise?" A rather energetic voice begged.

The person being addressed, Petra, put a hand up to her face, sighing. Even so, the girl smiled in what felt like natural amusement, "Louis, you've been asking me the same question since I first told you about it. You know, the whole point of a surprise is to be... well, surprised."

The one called Louis pouted, clearly very unhappy with the response she'd received, "You know how I am with surprises! I hate them! I can't handle the anticipation!"

She basically squealed, unable to contain herself. Her legs even squated up and down a few times to further convey her excitement as well. Truly, she acted like a child, fitting her rather unnaturally short height, despite her mind having greatly matured over the last ten years.

Petra actually laughed at Louis' antics, "You can go there early, if you really want to. I'm sure it won't be a problem." Louis visibly perked up at the suggestion whilst Petra thumbed behind her, "Beatrice still isn't ready yet, so i'm going to wait for her."

"Alright, see you there!" Louis was practically out the door already. Once Petra gave her the okay, she was pretty much already gone.

Petra blinked, but chuckled nonetheless. Then, remembering something, she yelled out to Louis, "You at least look presentable, right?!"

"Yup!" she nonchalantly yelled back without much care, shooting herself out the door in a hurry.

Louis wore rather casual, yellow and white, clothes. Her hair kept its longer length throughout the years, like her height, but whether it was presented neatly or messily was entirely dependent on her mood on any particular day.

In reality, Louis never really cared about how she looked or presented herself to others. The only times where she truly made an effort was for work, since it was, and still is, something incredibly important. Other than that, especially in a casual sense, the concern wasn't even on her mind.

When the door shut behind her, Petra chuckled for one last time. "There so goes..." she mumbled, still very much amused at Louis' behavior. Sometimes, though, she believed that Louis' antics would end up driving her to an early grave.

With that, Petra turned herself around and began to make her way through her little apartment until she reached a specific door. She waited a moment before raising a hand, lightly knocking on it to get the attention of somebody inside.

A high-pitched yelp sounded from inside the room, only serving to amuse Petra further. "Beatrice, are you almost ready?"

"Y-Yes! Betty will be out in just a few moments, I suppose," came the response.

Petra was satisfied with that answer and decided to continue waiting in the living area. On the inside of the room, however, the Great Spirit fumbled with her supplies. She scrambled to put her eyepatch back on, also doing her best to gather the remedy vials she'd packed with her, as well.

She kept one vial out, being sure to carefully put the rest of them away. She unplugged the end of the vial, putting it to her mouth and drinking the entirety of its contents in one chug. Once she was done, Beatrice took some time to catch a few breaths before putting the empty vial away with the others.

Afterward, the Great Spirit couldn't help but just stare ahead of her. Her mind was jumbled, lost in a plethora of thoughts ranging from both good and bad.

She'd grabbed a mirror and looked deeply into it, straight at her own reflection. She felt disgusted at seeing such a repulsive, abominable face.

Cute? Maybe once she was, but not anymore. She was a monster, now. Nothing more, nothing less.

Beatrice shook her head, doing her best to rid the thoughts away as she pushed the mirror back. She didn't want to look at herself anymore, hopping off of the chair she sat in and slowly walking toward the door.

When her hand reached for the knob, it froze. She became hesitant and unsure, but for what she did not know. Her hand willed itself forward, grabbing hold of the knob and turning it so that she could open the door. It felt like one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

When she walked out of this room, she'd have to interact with other people. People that loved her and thought highly of her. Beatrice couldn't even consider herself worthy of deserving any of that, anymore. That was why she found everything so... difficult.

Majority of her believed that she was nothing but an abomination that needed to be eliminated. But... that would make her Subaru, and many others, sad. That was something she didn't want, so she kept going, moving forward and living for their sakes.

Not long after leaving the room, Beatrice reconvened with Petra. No abnormal questions were asked, which the Great Spirit was thankful for. They only exchanged a few words, confirming that they had everything that they needed before heading out.

They walked together in silence, slowly but surely making their way to the designated meeting point. Petra walked slightly ahead of Beatrice, occasionally turning her head back to always see the Great Spirit's head hanging low.

Petra really wanted to talk to her, desperately so. But she didn't know how. She didn't know what to ask, what to say or even how to say it. Even though her stomach churned at seeing her friend in such a depressive state, wanting to help, she couldn't find the words to take the initiative.

Without knowing it, Petra had stopped walking. She had been too caught up in her thoughts to realize, only moderately snapping out of it when Beatrice, who'd similarly not been paying attention, walked into her. The Great Spirit looked up at Petra, inquisitive eyes drilling into the girl as she spoke, "What's wrong? Why did we stop, I suppose?"

Petra bit her lip, her head slightly turning away. She'd messed up here, hadn't she? There was no avoiding the topic now, she supposed.

Her head turned back to Beatrice, eyes choosing to wordlessly convey her worry. Beatrice noticed, her expression shifting for a mere second before settling on something neutral. Petra parted her lips, "Well... Beatrice, it's just... Are you okay?"

She was silent for a moment, blinking only once. As Petra studied her expression, it didn't seem to have changed at all. Beatrice tilted her head, as if she were confused, "Of course Betty is fine, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

Petra took a breath, looking at Beatrice dead in the eye as she began to explain her reasoning, "You've just been... depressed. It's pretty obvious. I just... I want to know if there's something wrong, okay? If there is... I want to help you."

It was true. Beatrice's mood had been abundantly clear, ever since Petra met her again. Even when the two had parted from Subaru, Beatrice's gloomy mood persisted. Sharing a space for the night helped tell a lot, as well.

Now, Petra felt as though she'd let it persist long enough. Seeing her friend this upset really hurt her on the inside. She didn't want Beatrice to feel this way, thus she wanted

to help her.

The Great Spirit was, once again, silent for another few seconds. "I see. Betty is fine though, so there is no need to worry for her wellbeing, in fact," she stated, slightly surprising Petra.

"I... I understand," she uttered, visibly deflating at the reply. For a moment, she averted her gaze to the side, her own thoughts plaguing her mind on their own. After that moment passed, she turned her head back to her friend with a hopeful look on her face, "Beatrice, just know that I'm your friend. You can tell me anything and I'll always be there to try and help you."

"Thank you," was all she replied, nodding in what seemed to be genuine appreciation. Petra let herself smile, but just a little bit. As long as Beatrice acknowledged what she said and even gave it some thought, then she'd be happy.

Further looking at Beatrice, Petra easily determined that the Great Spirit was ready to start moving again. Knowing that, Petra started to walk forward while her eyes lingered on Beatrice a little more. Due to that, she'd ended up accidentally running into someone.

Petra quickly snapped her head forward, looking at the figure she'd bumped into with an apologetic expression, "Oh! I'm really sorry, I wasn't watchi-"

The figure moved fast, their right arm raising as a hand grabbed Petra by the face. Immediately after grabbing hold the figure threw their arm to the right, effectively tossing Petra to the side.

The strength of the movement caused the girl to gasp, flying into the air. She hit the ground hard, sliding across it for a whole second until she hit a wall with a hard impact. Petra groaned, her body slumping on its side while she gasped for air.

Beatrice gaped as she watched that happen, the shock of such an attack preventing her from doing anything for those very few seconds. The attacker's eyes drew to her, citing Beatrice to raise her right palm in an attempt to defend herself.

The figure's left hand quickly sprung forward, grabbing hold of Beatrice's wrist, twisting her palm in an extremely painful way. Beatrice grit her teeth, doing her best to regain control of her hand so that she could cast a spell. Immediately, she was interrupted when the attacker's right hand grabbed hold of her throat.

Their grip was immensely tight, quickly raising Beatrice up into the air and above their own head. Beatrice struggled to move, or do anything at all; her legs desperately flailed in a desperate attempt to break free.

The attacker continued to squeeze as if their goal was to simply break Beatrice's neck. The Great Spirit clenched her left hand, allowing heat to build up within the empty grasp of her fingers before springing it forward and unleashing it all upon the attacker's face.

The force of the hit had been enough to send the figure's face into a recoil, knocking their hood off in the process. Things moved too fast for Beatrice to get a good look at them, the attacker's arm throwing itself aside and tossing her into a nearby alleyway as an added result of the attack.

Beatrice flew a good distance in the air, her back quickly hitting a corner wall. Beatrice immediately gasped and yelped, the sharp jab of the wall's corner hitting her back causing intense pain to surge through her body. She fell to the ground, on her knees. Her mind was overwhelmed, vision slightly blurred as some of her instincts overtook her mind.

Because of that, out of desperation, her body did its best to turn itself around and tried to crawl away. Her hands poorly grasped at the ground beneath her, struggling to even

bring herself even an inch or more forward.

She could hear the attacker's footsteps behind her, walking closer and closer within the alleyway. They weren't running, but they walked at a fast enough pace to clearly show that they were *livid*. Despite this, Beatrice continued to try desperately crawling forward with the slimmest hope of making it out in one piece.

It didn't take long for the figure to reach her, raising a single foot into the air before slamming the heel of their boot down onto Beatrice's back. Beatrice cried out in pain, whimpering as she tried and failed to stay strong.

"*Look at me,*" came the icy words, laced with hatred as they once again picked up their foot and slammed it back down on her back. Beatrice cried out again, the pain overwhelming. "*Look at me. Look at me. Look at me.*"

Beatrice yelped and cried out after each stomp, hearing those same three words each and every time. Her mind was jumbled, unable to properly think under the pressure. Though, she tried to turn herself over, to no avail. A part of her hoped that, if she did, they would stop.

But... the other part of her knew that they wouldn't. It was clear that they wanted her to suffer.

The attacker finally seemed to have enough, moving their boot from Beatrice's back and slipping it under her stomach. With one motion, they used it to turn Beatrice over and onto her back, allowing her to look up into the sky.

The Great Spirit took in large huffs, whimpering as her back lay flat on the ground. The light of sun in the sky occupied her vision before being blocked by a sudden looming figure. Beatrice narrowed her eyes as they adjusted to the change, only to soon have them widen at the surprising sight before her.

"Y-You..." she uttered, voice broken and almost unable to speak at all.

"Yes, *me,*" came the reply, their boot raising itself once again only to slam itself into the Great Spirit's stomach.

Beatrice yelped, tears escaping from her eyes. She wanted, so desperately, to get out of here; she wanted to run, crawl, or even teleport away... but she couldn't. Despite how much she wished for it to happen, it would not.

The Great Spirit took staggered breaths as she looked up at her attacker: a half-elf, purple eyes widened and dilated in a way that displayed her crazed state of mind. That look, that face, made Beatrice feel a deep sense of dread, wanting to escape even more.

Emilia applied more pressure to Beatrice's stomach, making the Great Spirit beneath her cry out, "*I finally found you,*" the half-elf said, her eyes shifting into more of a glare as they stared down at Beatrice in hatred.

Beatrice took rapid breaths, tears staining her cheeks as they continuously leaked from her eyes, "W-What do you... w-want, I-I suppose!"

Emilia didn't answer, instead choosing to bend herself down. From doing so, the pressure against Beatrice's stomach only increased. She felt as though she'd be crushed, wincing and still doing her best to try staying strong.

The half-elf raised a hand, with it soon approaching Beatrice's face. Emilia's fingers slowly, almost carefully, graced against the eyepatch around the Great Spirit's eye for a few seconds, her head tilting as she thoroughly inspected it. Then, without warning or indication, her fingers tore underneath it and ripped it off in one quick motion.

Beatrice yelped, Emilia's nails having scratched under her eye. As the Great Spirit's eyes refocused, looking at the half-elf above her, Emilia scoffed, "*You use that*

eyepatch to hide your shame."

With the eyepatch missing, Beatrice's discolored yellow left eye was easily able to be seen.

"Why...? Why did you do it?"

The half-elf questioned, her voice still laced with an icy venom that fluently cut through the barriers of Beatrice's mind. Then, she laughed. Emilia creepily laughed and giggled, as if she'd just heard a funny joke.

"You were jealous, weren't you? Me and Subaru were getting too close to your liking, so you took him away and tried to make me suffer!"

Beatrice's expression immediately shifted to showing how appalled she was at those statements, wincing soon thereafter due to apparent, ever still present, pain she felt. "D-D you not realize... the d-delusions you... speak, I supp-"

She was interrupted by a sudden increase of pressure on her stomach, causing her to wince and lose her breath. Following that, the pressure completely dissipated as Emilia lifted her foot, moving to the Great Spirit's side.

The half-elf crouched down next to her, head tilting as she looked at her victim straight in the eyes. *"I'm not insane,"* she stated, much to Beatrice's disagreement. *"I'm not the stupid half-elf girl that I used to be, either."*

Her hand went to Beatrice's ankle, right grabbing hold of it. In one motion, Emilia stood and brought the Great Spirit up with her, holding her upside down with ease. She lifted her arm, raising Beatrice high enough to bring them to eye level.

"B-Betty would never... hurt h-her contractor, in fact," she did her best to plead in reason, desperately stuttering out the words.

Emilia didn't respond, her eyes only narrowing at Beatrice in silence. Then, she started to spin. Her arm spun along with her body, building enough momentum to slam Beatrice straight into the nearest wall.

The impact was heavy, Beatrice's scream easily drowning out any noise it could have made. The pain was too much for her to handle. She couldn't even start trying to heal herself...

She wanted to cry, so much.

She wanted to die.

Emilia moved her arm back, raising Beatrice up by her ankle again. The wall she'd slammed the Great Spirit into was now indented with the shape of her body, but the half-elf hardly cared.

She started to jiggle Beatrice's body. Up, down, side to side... whichever way the half-elf could, she did. Emilia grit her teeth as she did so, her jiggles becoming more vigorous and angry as she kept trying and failing to shake something out.

Before long, multiple vials containing some kind of liquid dropped from Beatrice and onto the ground. The vials, made from glass, shattered on impact, their contents spilling across the ground to never be recovered. The Great Spirit heard this, but couldn't mentally bring herself to look.

A small box fell too, it's lightweight structure allowing it to hit the ground with a bounce. Both heard a small hollow clunk when it first made contact, neither paying mind to the scraping sound it made as it skidded away.

Something else fell; something thin, but clunky enough to make an odd noise when it hit the ground. Emilia's eyes followed it, expression shifting immediately upon seeing

what it was. Her head and gaze quickly dropped as her attention fully focused on the object.

Without care, Emilia flung her arm aside, tossing Beatrice away. The Great Spirit flew in the air, not with too much distance, rolling on the ground before coming to a halt. She found the sudden urge and will to bring herself to her knees. Her head turned toward the half-elf, eyes widening at what she saw.

Emilia bent down, a hand reaching out to grab a small stone tablet from off of the ground. Once she did, the half-elf flipped it over in her hand, looking directly at the dimly lit symbol it displayed.

Beatrice wanted to move, to take the object away from her, but she couldn't. She could only stay on her knees, unable to properly stand as her body just wouldn't allow it.

What Emilia held was the very seal that plagued everyone for so long: The Seal of Eternity.

Beatrice never left it behind, even after Subaru had been freed. How could she? After ten years of lugging it around, keeping it next to her at all times... she developed a dependency on its very presence.

The half-elf mockingly laughed, "*This is it, isn't it? After all of this time... I finally...*"

The smile she'd begun to form, the victorious tone she started to use, vanished in an instant. Her face hardened, her grip around the seal becoming noticeably more tight as her frustration rose. Her eyes narrowed, gripping the seal with her other hand as she rose to her feet.

"*Why... Why, why, why, why, WHY!*" She shook it in her hands, her anger increasing while her tantrum proceeded.

Emilia moved herself around, hoping that, maybe, her change in position would work. It didn't.

She froze, her eyes once again landing on Beatrice. A glare presented itself on her face, her hand harshly flinging the seal to the ground. It bounced away, each impact making an echoed clang until it finally came to a halt near the wall.

"*It's your fault, isn't it?*" she spat, her right arm extending so that an icicle could materialize within her palm. "*It won't work because of you!*"

Beatrice took huffs of breath, only able to look up as Emilia inched ever so slightly closer. The icicle had since formed within her hand, raising itself up and behind her head with a preparation to strike.

It was clear to Beatrice that Emilia was done playing with her food.

"*I promised... You will pay.*"

This was it, wasn't it? Beatrice knew that she couldn't heal, defend herself or even teleport. All of the mana and energy within her was being put to keeping her condition stable. With her vials smashed, it was probable that she'd mutate and go out of control soon, anyway.

Emilia finally got close enough, her right hand fully bent behind her head. The half-elf glared down upon her target, a snarl ever so present on her darkened face. Beatrice could only look up to see her fate.

Her suffering would end, but so would her life.

She didn't close her eyes, but she embraced the fact of what would happen next. Beatrice thought that, perhaps, her death would come to benefit those she'd inadvertently hurt and pained. Within her mind, she voiced her final thoughts.

She internally wished her contractor good luck. One final, sad tear escaped from her discolored eye as she thought for one final time, "Farewell, Subaru."

Then, much to both girl's surprise, a yell erupted from the entrance of the alleyway. It momentarily took Emilia's attention away from Beatrice, turning her head to barely catch a glimpse of the charging figure before being tackled to the ground.

Emilia was thrown off of Beatrice, much to the Great Spirit's shock, saving her life.

The half-elf was surprised, the blunt end of a dagger jabbing itself into her right wrist to make her drop the icicle in her hand. They swatted the icicle away quickly after, but Emilia's eyes were only focused on her attacker's face.

Petra growled with gritted teeth, doing her best to try and restrain Emilia so that she wouldn't move. With all of her strength, she tried to pin Emilia in place on the ground.

She didn't want to fight; not Emilia. Petra knew Emilia; she knew that she wasn't normally like this. The look on her face was anything but natural. She would have never tried to kill Beatrice, their mutual friend, either.

Something happened to her to make her act so... crazy. Petra, with all of the good still in her heart, wanted to cease the needless fighting and solve the situation peacefully. She held onto the hope that it was possible. If that meant restraining Emilia first, all so that she could get her to see reason, then so be it.

But she'd underestimated the strength of a half-elf. Emilia was easily able to overpower her, quickly pushing Petra off and sitting herself up. Despite how much she'd been trained in self-defense, Petra was still too slow to notice Emilia's next attack.

Beatrice's eyes widened, her mouth agape as a pained, staggered gasp escaped Petra's mouth.

She'd *never* forget the sight of her friend being impaled by an icicle, the other end erupting out of her back tainted and stained with her blood.

"Say, Dora..."

"Yes, Baru?"

"Can you... Can you talk to me? About everything you're feeling, I mean."

They'd only been walking hand in hand with their hoods up. Neither of them talked the entire way there, instead having chosen to bask in the silence. When they finally arrived at their destination, seeing as how nobody was there just yet, Subaru had been the one to finally break the silence.

Pandora remained quiet after he asked his question, though. He wouldn't lie to himself by saying that he wasn't worried; not only for her, but for others around them as well.

She'd dropped her gaze, her lips momentarily pursing with an influx of anger, which soon went away. When she looked up at him again, even with her hood up, he could feel the softness of her eyes.

"I am angry," she admitted, giving his hand a light squeeze as if to indicate why.

Still, Subaru still found himself lost. He carefully tilted his head to the side, eyes tracing her with care while his thumb caressed the back of her hand, "What are you angry for?"

"Threats on our lives. *Your* life," she answered right away, lightly shaking her head. "How can you not be angry at such a notion?"

Subaru took a breath, looking at her with resolve yet holding into the softness in his gaze, "Of course I'm angry. If someone threatened to kill you, Beako, Emilia, Petra, or

anyone else, I'd be absolutely livid. But... I don't want to kill anyone; not like that."

Subaru did his best to keep his composure, under the circumstances. Seeing Pandora kill Roy in the manner she did — even before that, watching and hearing as Roy's skull cracked under the intensity of her grip — made him realize that more of her heartless, past self was still in there. More than he initially wanted to believe, anyway.

When Pandora previously stated that he was the only thing keeping her held down and sane, he believed her. Even with him around, she had moments of... relapse.

She'd draw blanks, space out and develop a particularly hostile aura. Subaru could only imagine what would happen if he wasn't there to help pull her out of her dazes, or even just not with her in general.

Pictures of Pandora fully reverting back to her old self filled his head. Her arms outstretched over the flames of the enemies she'd burned and slaughtered, a cold and satisfied smile persisting on the Witch's as she proudly looked upon her handiwork with cold eyes.

The true Witch of Vainglory would resurface again. The Pandora that he knew and loved would be gone, replaced by the one he hated. She would return to wreak havoc upon the world, fulfilling whatever twisted goal she'd set her mind for.

Subaru had to shake his head, hoping those images would follow. He didn't want to imagine Pandora in that way, especially not now. He wouldn't let her befall that fate, not again.

"I do not see the problem," she finally responded to his statement, fully knocking him out of his inner thoughts. "Killing our enemies is a very reasonable and justifiable action."

"If there's no other option, I can agree," he admitted.

Subaru decided not to shy away from the things he believed, which included this. He distinctly remembered killing Petelgeuse and Regulus in particular, believing them to both be unsavable nor deserving of such at the time.

However, now, with his expanded knowledge and mindset, his thoughts have changed. He realized that these people weren't always as crazy as their Archbishop personalities made them out to be. He saw firsthand how they could change through both Louis and Sirius alike.

His only regret was how he could do nothing for Capella's sake. Even if he wanted to save her, the means to do so were out of his hands. Her death was a prime example of killing an enemy because there was no other option available.

He then proceeded to continue, "But if there are other options, we should at least try to take them."

"We are not certain that it would have worked," she retorted, repeating what she'd said before with wavering confidence.

"It worked on Sirius, didn't it?" he rhetorically asked her, specifically inquiring for a response that she was unable to muster. Pandora averted her gaze, as if she was guilty, while he spoke, "Roy could've become like her and Louis... a normal kid."

She finally responded, looking directly at him all the while, "You have only just discovered this power. How could you be so certain that things would not have gone wrong? How could you know if the possibility of even using it again was there?"

He took a sharp breath, "You're right." He looked at his hands, as if trying to inwardly look at the ability through them. He continued, "I just got this power. I don't even really know how to really use it on my own, since I was only guided the last time." He shook

his head, lowering his hands and looking at her with a sternly resolved expression, "But the possibility was definitely still there."

Pandora's eyes averted themselves, unable to respond to what Subaru said. She knew that his stance wouldn't waver; she didn't want their opposing ideals to clash and cause them to fight again. When they fought in the cell, something inside of her felt wrong. It was like her stomach twisted in on itself. She hated that feeling.

Subaru suddenly grabbed hold of her other hand, to her slight surprise. He brought their hands together in the middle, bringing them up and looking at her with pleading eyes. He spoke to her with a light voice, "Can you please promise me that we won't resort to killing anyone unless there's no other option for us?"

It was clear that he would not change his mind. She directed her head down, avoiding his eyes. She responded in a low tone, making one last attempt to appeal to him, "Surely you do not believe that just anyone can change."

"You did," he quickly pointed out. "You, more than anyone, should know that it's possible to change, no matter what was done in the past."

Pandora went completely still after that, silently considering the implications of everything he'd just said. Subaru could hear her take sharp, sometimes staggered, breaths. Eventually, her head picked itself up so that her eyes may look into his.

After a few seconds of continuous silence, she delivered a firm and meaningful, "I promise."

For a moment, he was surprised. He hadn't expected her to agree as easily as she did, but he was proud of her for it. The fact that she promised was further proof to his point that anyone, given the proper circumstances or chances, could change.

Her words caused him to develop a smile, something which made her heart flutter upon seeing. She enjoyed gazing upon his happy face. Seeing him happy made her happy. "Thank you," he said, almost in a whisper, as he pulled her close.

Their arms wrapped around one another, forming an embrace with as much love and affection as they could give. Being in the middle of a Lugnican district, their public display of affection drew some eyes — some people even smiled — but they hardly cared about the attention. Smartly, they'd kept their conversation quiet.

After a while, much to their displeasure, the two separated. The warmth of the other left as soon as they backed away, immediately rejoining their hands to make up for the lost contact. Though they wanted to stay in an embrace for much longer, the fact that they were in public prevented them from doing so.

They proceeded to wait in that location, hoping that those they were waiting for would arrive soon. Surprisingly, not even a few seconds after they'd broken from their hug, someone tapped on Subaru's shoulder.

"Uhm... excuse me, sir?" A feminine voice spoke to him from behind, prompting him to turn around. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything, but I heard you mention my name earlier in your conversation. Do I know you?"

Subaru's eyes couldn't help but widen at who he was seeing, almost unable to believe it. "Louis... You're all grown up," he uttered out, looking at her in slight awe.

On the contrary to his reaction, the girl in front of him looked disgusted or even creeped out. She repeated her question, more warily this time, "Do I... Do I know you?"

Those words brought Subaru's mind back to reality, causing him to suddenly chuckle to himself as if he was amused. It served only to further creep her out.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I have this hood on, so you can't really recognize me," he said to her, making her confused.

It was clear by Louis' facial expression that she was massively uncomfortable, prompting Subaru to try resolving things quicker. He raised his free hand, reaching it behind his head and grabbing hold of his hood. Then, in a fast motion, he uncovered his face for a few mere seconds before repositioning the hood back in place.

Afterward, his head carefully turned back and forth. They were all still in public, thus making it a dangerous place to reveal himself. Anyone could've recognized him, had they seen. Though, it wasn't like he had much of a choice in this situation, knowing that Louis likely wouldn't have followed him somewhere private so that he could do it discreetly.

Suddenly, a rough grip presented itself around his wrist, pulling him forward and subsequently dragging Pandora along as well. They were yanked into an alleyway close by, providing some form of privacy. Before he could gather his bearings, a hand reached behind his hood and forcefully pulled it down.

"It really is you," he heard Louis mutter. His eyes drew to her just in time to see her shed tears, her own eyes unable to pry away from his face. "I don't even know what to say. I..."

She sniffled, wiping away some of her tears with an arm. Subaru developed a smile, activating Third Shift so that he could use his hands to move hers aside. He did so gently, much to her surprise, lowering them down to her sides before bringing his hands back up to her cheeks.

He cupped them, wiping away some of her tears using his thumbs, "You're all big now. Though... your sense of fashion hasn't really changed since you were a kid."

That made her laugh, her head dropping a little as she developed a smile of her own. When Louis picked her head back up, he saw how her smile openly showcased her signature sharp teeth. With a playful voice, she retorted, "I can tell that you haven't changed much, either."

"Hey, I know I haven't changed much, but look at you!" Subaru took his hands off of her cheeks, bringing them so he could gesture to her, "You're not the same little girl that protected me in Vollachia. Plus, you're actually talking with actual words now! You're not communicating with only gurgles and cuddles anymore!"

Louis' cheeks flushed red, greatly embarrassed by what he'd said. Certain memories resurfaced, detailing times where she'd jump Subaru in an attempt to show affection. Sometimes it didn't even matter what he was doing, or what he was wearing, she'd just do it.

"I was younger back then!" she exclaimed, leaning her body forward while a pout made its way onto her face. "Of course I've learned a bunch of stuff!"

Subaru just laughed, "I know, I know." His smile persisted, similarly recalling some memories of the past.

Louis saved his butt many times, in many different loops, during his time in Vollachia. There would also be times where, even in his Natsumi persona, she'd jump on him for cuddles. He may not have been too fond of it all then, mainly because she used to be a dangerous Archbishop of Gluttony that personally tormented him for a while, but he sure missed those times.

He outstretched his arms again, opening them out as if to invite her in, "You know, Louis, I wouldn't mind some cuddles now. Only if you want, of course."

He tilted his head forward a little to help tempt her. She could only look at him for a solid moment, surprised at such a gesture. She remembered how he always used to push her away, unwelcoming to any of her affection. Back then it hurt her feelings, knowing that, while he didn't want affection from her, he was more than happy to get it from others.

Now though, seeing him welcome it with literal open arms, accompanied with an invitation for her to embrace him, it felt almost surreal.

That was why she didn't waste even a single moment of the opportunity, launching herself at him with arms opened wide. She crashed into him, making him stagger backward a bit, her arms wrapping around his waist while her head dug into his chest.

Subaru, after recovering from his stagger, didn't hesitate to return the hug. He held her securely, almost protectively, a smile still present on his face. It felt great, he would admit.

Unfortunately, the moment didn't last too long. The whispers from before decided to enter his head again. Their words, as soft and guiding as they were, completely overrode his thoughts. He felt no ill intent from them; he felt as though he could trust them once more, so he did. Thus, he surrendered himself to their guidance.

This time, he didn't need to move; with Louis in his arms, it made things easier. His eyes closed as an image appeared in his head, though he couldn't completely understand it. He could feel himself searching for something, almost like moving through a maze, with the whispers carefully guiding him on where to go.

Eventually, he found something unnatural. It was hard to find, buried deep, dormant within Louis' very being and soul. Using Natural State, he dug it out. After doing so, he felt the same sensations as before. It was as if he'd plucked it straight out of her, the oddity immediately coming to him once it was free.

However, this time was different. Upon entering his body, the Witch Factor seemed rather small and attentive. Then, as if they'd been hiding, two others of similar nature emerged. The three interacted with one another, becoming closer and bonding, until they became one in the same.

The whispers seemed happy and satisfied once again, quieting and promptly making their exit from his head after everything was complete.

Subaru's eyes widened, his legs suddenly giving out and making him fall to the ground. Louis gasped in shock, doing her best to keep him standing whilst Pandora bent down to catch him. With their combined efforts, both girls prevented him from collapsing and helped him prop up against a nearby wall.

"What happened, Subaru?!" Louis exclaimed, obviously worried for his general well-being. "You're not dying, are you? You just got here!"

Despite feeling lightheaded and dazed, he amusedly chuckled at her comment, "No, I'm not dying. I just feel... really tired, is all."

"You used it again?" Pandora spoke up with an inquiry, making Louis' attention draw toward her.

The girl looked at Pandora curiously, having finally acknowledged her presence. In a fairly casual tone, she proceeded to say, "Oh, I have no idea who you are."

Pandora merely gave her a side-glance, her focus mainly on Subaru. Speaking of him, he nodded to her previous question, "Yeah. It kinda just... went off on it's own... there."

He was taking his time in catching breath, relaxing as he slumped against the wall. Pandora nodded back in understanding, choosing to sit beside him as recovered. Louis, feeling left out, chose to follow Pandora's example and sat with him on the other side.

Louis didn't bother to question what they'd said, which surprised both Subaru and Pandora respectively. It seemed as though she was only worried about Subaru's safety. He appreciated the lack of questions; he'd had too many of those from the last two days.

They sat in a peaceful silence for a while, patiently waiting as Subaru caught his breath. After some time passed, he slightly turned his head toward Louis and spoke to her, "So... you've got a job now, huh? A chef, I hear?"

She gasped at his inquiry, realizing something. "Now I know what the surprise was! Petra wanted me to see you again!" she exclaimed, feeling a bit shocked that her roommate and sister-like figure would hide something so important.

Subaru lightly laughed, "Yeah. We would've seen you yesterday, but we were told you had work."

"Mhm. I work at a restaurant nearby and it gets busy a lot," she pouted. She slumped down in her spot, visibly dejected at the information she'd just been told, "I like my job, but it can be really irritating at times. It makes me miss so much stuff..."

"That's generally how any kind of work is," Subaru commented in both understanding and sympathy.

His mind couldn't help but reminisce about his homeworld for a moment. He wondered what kind of job he would've gotten had he never come to Lugnica. A dead-end supermarket job, or perhaps some kind of office worker?

He shook his head, refocusing on Louis. It was poetic that she'd become a chef, in a way. Still, genuine words of encouragement smoothly flowed from his mouth, "You've got yourself a good job, one that you enjoy, and that's what matters. You're taking care of yourself and I couldn't be more proud of you."

He couldn't see it, but Louis blushed from the praise while Pandora smiled at his other side. Louis mumbled a small, "Thank you..."

He hummed, as if saying, "You're welcome." After another moment of silence, a question stemmed from his curiosity, "Say, why didn't you go with Rem? She's probably the closest thing you have to a mother, so I figured that you would've gone with her."

Louis shifted in her spot for a moment, her head tilting downward. Though she looked downcast, a small smile remained on her face, "She didn't want me to go with her."

Subaru's interest piqued at that, genuinely surprised. Knowing Rem and how protective she was of Louis, he figured that she would've wanted to continue taking care of her. So, he questioned, "She didn't? How come?"

"Well..." Louis started with a sigh. "I wanted to, but she said something about it not being a safe place for me. I didn't really understand why, and I still don't, but it's what made me join Petra and the others." The smile on her face persisted, distinctly remembering Rem and the things that she, as her pseudo-mother, did for her. "I still remember when we said goodbye. She said that she loved me... gave me this re~eally big hug, too."

With that explanation, Subaru easily understood why Rem didn't want Louis to go with her. Contrary to what Subaru had initially believed, Rem's protectiveness of Louis was exactly what ushered her off to the capital. Rem, for one reason or another, believed that Louis would be safer with everyone else as opposed to with her.

As for why, Subaru didn't know and he was sure that Louis didn't either. Though, he would definitely try to find out.

"Also, speaking of Petra, she and Beako aren't with you?" Subaru asked, genuinely curious as to why Louis ended up coming alone.

Louis perked up at the question, "Oh, yeah! Petra said that Beatrice was still getting ready, so they were gonna leave a little later. But, I think they should've been here by now..."

She trailed off, evident worry creeping into her voice. Subaru let out a prepared huff of air through his nose, suddenly thrusting himself up into a standing position. The girls at either of his sides sprung up with him, concern laced in their expressions as they tried to support him.

"Baru, you should not move yet," Pandora insisted, worried on behalf of his health after seeing him nearly faint and collapse on the ground. Louis nodded and hummed furiously in agreement.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he too insisted, truthfully feeling some of his energy return to him. He felt like he could stand, but he didn't think that he'd be able to do anything over the top.

Curiosity got the best of him, joining hands with Pandora so that he could activate First Shift without it conflicting with Third Shift. Two white dots, depicting whom he was looking for, appeared in his vision upon activation.

"They're close," he commented, his head tilting with an unsure feeling. He could sense that something was wrong.

When he attempted to take their burdens, his face contorted and mixed with overwhelming feelings as the ringing in his head and ears returned. He felt the same tingling sensation as before, alerting him to some kind of danger. Why did it feel like he'd be hurt, or even die, if he took their burdens?

Due to that, he physically couldn't do anything. His instincts, peaked from his "Danger Sense", prevented him from doing so. His stomach churned, his foot instinctively taking a step toward, then another, as he started to walk closer to the dots.

"Subaru?" Louis asked, looking at him oddly.

"What is wrong?" Pandora similarly questioned, her eyes laced with worry as her lover failed to even spare a single glance at her.

His eyes stared dead-ahead, senses honed as he walked toward. "I dunno," he said, stepping further down the alleyway.

The girls carefully followed behind, watching as he made what seemed to be strange and unguided turns. He stopped at a four-way intersection, looking down each possible route once with wide, honed eyes before firmly choosing one particular path without hesitation.

He was so close, just one more turn and...

He gaped at the sight, his eyes widening and the pit in his stomach ripping itself open, his heart skipped a beat, upon having turned the final corner.

"PETRA!" Louis screamed, immediately rushing out from behind him. She knelt down by her friend's side, holding the girl down as squirmed on the ground. Petra was gasping for whatever air she could get, a fairly large and sharp icicle protruding out of both her front and back.

Just a little further away, Beatrice was being held up in the air with a similar icicle aimed at her throat. Even with that, the little spirit managed to turn her head, eyes widening upon seeing her contractor, "S-Subaru..."

Subaru himself couldn't help but look on in shock, his eyes firmly locked onto the figure holding Beatrice in the air. The very same person that undoubtedly stabbed an icicle through Petra's chest.

Beautiful silver hair, unique elven pointy-ears and amethyst eyes that used to sparkle in the light. He knew exactly who those features belonged to, uttering the name in a soft voice, "Emilia...tan?"

Emilia gave Beatrice a side-glance, her eyes similarly gazing upon the newcomers before her. Her eyes first looked at Louis, who'd rushed to Petra's side. Emilia hardly paid those two girls any mind, seeing as though they weren't a threat to her.

Next was the hooded individual who seemed to look at her oddly. Emilia examined them for a few seconds, feeling something off but being unable to pinpoint what it exactly was.

When Emilia moved her gaze to the last person, Beatrice's mutter finally dawned on her. The half-elf initially thought that the Great Spirit was just making a desperate call out to the one she'd wronged, perhaps in some plea for forgiveness, but no... he was here. He was *really* here.

She snorted, which slowly progressed into a rapid stream of giggles and chuckles, much to everyone's confusion, wariness or disgust. "I get it," Emilia mumbled, dropping the icicle she held so that her palm could cover her face. "*I get it, I get it, I get it, I get it...*"

Emilia threw her arm aside, effectively tossing Beatrice away. The Great Spirit's back quickly made contact with the wall, a short and rough bounce causing her to hit the ground on her stomach. Subaru gasped as Beatrice was discarded in such a way, only able to watch as she groaned and cried out in pain.

His gaze locked back onto Emilia, narrowed and focused. His fists clenched, face hardening as his anger grew. Emilia continued looking at him, a crazed smile gracing her face, "I couldn't free you... because you were already here!"

She let out a chilling laugh, which caused mostly everyone to become more defensive. Subaru glared at the girl in front of him, unable to recognize the same sweet hearted half-elf he'd once fallen in love with. Right now, this Emilia was someone else entirely.

"I'm so~ happy that you're back, Subaru!" she giggled, swaying a bit from side to side as she swooned. "We have a lo~ot to catch up on! Let's go, Subaru~! I have a ve~ery nice home in the forest I want to show you!"

His eyes drifted down to Petra, who Louis held in her arms. She was desperately trying to breathe, still gasping for air as she writhed on the ground. It was very clear that she was in pain, suffering.

Then they shot over to Beatrice, who lay almost motionless not too far away. At first glance, one would have thought she was dead... but he could feel their contract. She was alive, but barely.

Subaru was about to let his rage take control as he took a single step forward. He was about to become the biggest hypocrite in this world, letting his rage win.

But he was stopped.

An arm extended out from the side, preventing him from proceeding any further. He snapped back to his senses, turning his head to look at the arm's owner: Pandora.

She shook her head, silently telling him not to fulfill the urges his emotions fed to his mind. She'd seen how he was about to walk the wrong path, so she'd brought him back, just as he always did for her.

"I will handle her," Pandora said, lowering her arm from Subaru's chest and taking a step to the side. It was only right. This was on her, not him; it never was his problem.

Emilia heard her comment, using her eyes to follow the girl with curiosity and amusement. Handle her? It was funny enough to the half-elf's broken mind that she almost laughed. No matter, though. Once things were done and taken care of, she'd take Subaru for herself. She'd never lose him again.

With one swift motion, Pandora reached a hand behind her hood and pulled it down. Her hair sprung out from underneath, temporarily obscuring the view of her face. But as her hair settled, Emilia's expression subtly began to change.

The crazed smile, accompanied by her rather enthusiastically displayed features, dropped low. Her face hardened as her eyes slowly narrowed, shooting invisible daggers at their target as a certain realization crawled up her back.

Emilia knew that hair.

She knew those eyes, that face.

This was the same person who'd taken everything from her... not once, but twice.

The Witch of Vainglory: Pandora.

Her mind forgot about Beatrice; she was *nothing* compared to the calamity before her now.

Pandora had taken away Geuse.

Pandora had taken away mother Fortuna.

Pandora had taken away her home.

Now... Pandora was responsible for taking away the one person she held above all else: Subaru.

It had taken her too long to realize it, but she loved him. When she finally came to understand her feelings, it had been far too late. That fact truly pained her.

Emilia's heart ached. Her eyes looked to Subaru for a moment, then back to Pandora. The Witch stood tall, now further off to the side, looking at her with a steady gaze. A light breeze blew through the alleyway, gently picking up both girl's hair so that it may flow in the wind.

Seeing Subaru standing next to the Witch was confusing, painful even. Why was he with her? Did he join her? Did Subaru hate her now?

No... No, that couldn't be right. He would never hate her. He would never stand next to someone so vile, so cruel. He promised her, didn't he? He promised that he would stay with her, that he would love her and be with her till the end.

Yes... Yes, the Witch had to be manipulating him. Perhaps it was some form of mind control or something with her Authority...

Emilia's hands curled into fists, tightening in on themselves by the millisecond as her rage only grew. Her eyes stayed narrowed while her pupils dilated, only one singular focus taking the forefront of her mind.

While Pandora still unmoving stood, she was not unready. When Emilia's foot drew back, launching herself forward with the next movement, she'd not missed a beat.

"Die."

With an arm drawn behind her head Emilia appeared directly in front of Pandora, preparing to strike with a singular slice to the throat. But Pandora was fast too, reaching out with one hand and grabbing hold of Emilia's collar. Her other hand went to the half-elf's arm, keeping it back so that she could not be hit by the shard of ice in Emilia's hand, while her body pivoted itself around.

Pandora lowered herself, taking Emilia down with her. Using her arms she slammed Emilia down to the ground, utilizing both of her hands to try keeping her pinned.

With all the strength she could muster, Emilia raised a leg up to deliver an incredibly strong kick directly to Pandora's behind. A half-elf's strength was not to be trifled with, the force of the kick knocking the former Witch off of her and across the ground.

Pandora quickly altered her position, rolling and bouncing off of the ground in such a way that brought her back to her feet. She skid across the ground to a halt, a hand similarly scraping against it to help slow her pace, as Emilia flipped herself over.

From the ground, the half-elf lunged at her. She sprung forward quickly, coming to her feet and attempting to deliver a clean blow straight to the former Witch's head.

Pandora brought up her left arm, blocking and hooking Emilia's right arm down in a parry. Pandora blocked Emilia's other arm with her left, parrying another strike. The onslaught of strikes and parries began, both sides stuck in a temporary stalemate, each of their arms striking and blocking the other in quick assaults.

Pandora made a move of her own, hastily grabbing hold of Emilia's wrists and holding them out to either side. The half-elf grit her teeth, trying her best to fight against Pandora's grip but unable to surpass its strength.

Both of their arms shook as they battled for control. Emilia opened her palms, a particular coldness radiating from their center as she aimed them at Pandora's face.

Pandora saw this, immediately using her hands to bend Emilia's wrists upward. It proved to be just in time, two icicles having formed in her palms only a second later and immediately shooting into the sky at high speeds. They continued on in a straight path, disappearing as a small glint into the light.

"Die."

Emilia drew her head back, bringing it forth with immense strength and power. It made contact with Pandora's nose, drawing blood and making her recoil from the hit in a stumble.

As Pandora stumbled back, Emilia took advantage of the ample opportunity to move forward and roughly push her against a wall. Pandora's face recoiled as Emilia delivered a hard punch to her left cheek, reviving another hard push to keep her against the wall.

The half-elf's left hand raised, prompting Pandora to duck so that she could avoid a quick moving slice from a sharpened ice blade. The slice from the blade cut cleanly through the wall, causing bricks and rocks to fly out and onto the ground.

Pandora pushed her away, causing Emilia to momentarily stumble and quickly regain her footing. The former Witch rushed forward, taking advantage of the opening so that she could pin Emilia on the ground once more.

This time she put a knee on her chest, using both hands to keep her wrists down. Emilia struggled underneath her, gritting her teeth and grunting as she did her best to fight against Pandora's strength.

Thinking that it may help her see reason, Pandora decided to utter one simple line, *"Fortuna is alive."*

However, it immediately had the opposite effect. Those words caused Emilia to momentarily freeze, her eyes widening as her mind went haywire. When her thoughts recentered themselves, her facial expression turned into a furious snarl.

She raised her leg and attempted to knock the Witch off of her once again. Pandora was somewhat surprised at how hard Emilia kicked her, thinking that her rage amplified her strength.

Though she only budged a little, having expected the attack this time. Pandora did her best to keep a sturdy position over the pinned half-elf as powerful, repetitive kicks

assaulted her behind.

After that didn't work, Emilia improvised. Turning a palm to the ground, she quickly began generating a mound of ice.

"Die."

Pandora was barely able to notice before it erupted out from the ground, having to roll off of Emilia so that she could avoid being impaled by the ice spike.

Emilia rolled over too, taking the opportunity to reverse the situation. She pinned Pandora to the ground, putting her right palm right up against her face. The half-elf immediately began calling upon her magic, attempting to freeze Pandora right where she lay.

Pandora thought fast, opening her mouth and delivering a hard bite to Emilia's thumb. The half-elf's eyes widened, immediately registering the pain and drawing her hand back.

She instinctively grabbed at her thumb as if it would soothe the pain, giving Pandora a chance to knock her off. Emilia landed on her butt, watching as Pandora quickly stood herself up.

With her eyes narrowing into a shivering glare, Emilia rushed forward with a blade of ice appearing in each hand.

And so the fight continued.

Meanwhile, Subaru rushed to Petra's side, holding both his nose and behind. Third Shift, at times, was counterintuitive. Though, from watching the girls fight for a short time, he knew that he could trust Pandora with handling Emilia.

It was clear to him that she was holding herself back. Had she wanted to gravely injure or hurt Emilia, she already would have. He was just thankful that Pandora would keep true to their earlier promise.

Subaru quickly knelt down on Petra's other side, giving Louis her own room. The former Archbishop of Gluttony was looking at her friend with immense panic, hands waving all around with a lack of confidence in where to put them.

When she saw him bend down, she looked at him with tearful eyes, "S-Subaru! What d-do we do?"

Petra, laying bloodied on the ground, slowly turned her head to look at him. Almost breathless, she gave him a small smile using her red-stained lips, "Su...baru." She tried to catch some more air, barely able to even speak, "Hap...py ... to ... s...ee ... y...ou."

Subaru's breath hitched, his body and hands shaking as he heard Petra's broken words. Despite how hurt she was, she still tried to smile at him; she still told him that she was happy to see him.

Tears escaped from his eyes.

A hand shakily slipped behind her head, gently lifting it up so that she could become just a little more comfortable. He shook his head, trying to deny the reality he currently found himself facing. With a soft voice, he desperately did his best to beg, "No... Please, save your energy, Petra... Save your energy."

He gently laid his other hand atop her stomach, closing his eyes and trying his best to focus on his internal powers. He tried so desperately to call upon Natural State, knowing that, if he did, everything would be okay.

Only... nothing happened.

Nothing was changing. Nothing was different.

Petra was still dying!

He tried harder. His eyelids tightly clenched themselves shut, reaching out so desperately for help within his own mind.

Nobody answered.

As more tears broke through the dam in his eyes, he continued to try harder. He internally hoped and begged for his Authority to work. He wanted the whispers to come back, to show him how to heal her!

He could see Petra's dying form in his head, but it wasn't the image he needed. What visualized in his head was not the work of his Authority, but instead a horrific memory of what still lay beyond his closed eyes.

He could still see every detail. The bloodied icicle that still impaled her. Pieces of her insides and skin laying across her body and the ground. All of the blood, *her blood*...

"Sa...ve..." Subaru heard her utter, immediately opening his eyes so that he could look at her.

No matter how much he tried to keep it steady, his gaze shook as he watched her struggle. Her fingers twitched ever so slightly at times, her eyes never looking away from his continuously shaking form.

Not even a moment later, the girl began choking on her own blood, coughing it up in large amounts onto her stomach.

Subaru and Louis did their best to raise Petra up, marginally helping to clear her throat. However, the icicle impaled through her chest made it difficult to move her and caused Petra too much pain when the two even tried to do so.

Subaru moved his hand away from her stomach, now covered in her blood. He brought it to Petra's own hand, gently yet firmly gasping it while trying his best to hold onto her in whatever way he could. He felt the slightest of pulls on his hand, her fingers lightly wrapping around his own in return.

He still could do nothing but watch her choke on her own blood, feeling more like a failure than ever. Petra was taking her last breaths, and he could do nothing to save her.

Tears continued to flow from his eyes, but he didn't even notice. Petra looked back to him, her eyes lingering on his face with an open and bloodied mouth. She gurgled out only two words, "Sa...ve ... h...er."

With a shaken breath and a quivering lip, he could only shake his head. Desperation clawed away at his mind, begging to her, "Please don't talk Petra... I-It's okay, you'll be okay. Just... please..."

She tried to close her mouth, but it only opened again a second later. Blood flowered out of it, spilling on both herself and the ground below.

Her head marginally began to tilt to the side, Subaru's hand behind her head slightly moving to compensate. Her eyes never tracked back to him, staring forward as her head continued its descent.

"Bel...eve ... in ... y...ou."

Petra's breaths hitched, more soft than ever as the slight grip on his hand loosened. Her entire body suddenly became heavier in their arms, finally going limp. As her head rested on its side, her eyes could only continue to lifelessly stare ahead.

"P-Petra...?" Louis tearfully called out, leaning herself forward. Louis' hand cupped Petra's cheek, turning the girl's head to the other side so that she could look at her. "Petra, please wake up!" she exclaimed, tears blurring her vision as she pleaded for the girl to awaken. "Please don't leave me! Please, I can't..."

Subaru gently removed his hand from behind Petra's head, watching while Louis desperately held onto the corpse of her dear friend. He blankly stared ahead, his mind breaking down on itself.

Petra's final words stuck with him like glue, clinging to his mind and replaying on loop over and over again without stopping. It haunted him.

His heart shattered, trying to remember her signature smile only for the image of her bloodied one to take its place. His eyes glanced upon her pale and limp body, the realization of everything that happened dawning on him in full force.

Petra was dead.

He failed to save her.

Louis was alone now; she had nobody. Her friend, her roommate, is dead.

He failed to save her. He

failed to save her.

He failed.

Images flashed through his head; memories of Petra. He remembered all of her sweet smiles, her cheerful nature and kind-hearted personality. He remembered when she smiled at him and wished him luck on his journey, waving him goodbye. It didn't matter what loop it was, she never seemed to change.

Now she's gone.

A sudden glint caught his eye. When his focus drew to it, he froze. Upon looking at the object he saw, it was apparent to him that there may still be hope. A solution to everything lay in sight, and all he needed to do was reach for it.

So he did, his body loosely bending itself down and leaning forward. His fingers lightly grasped at the object, taking it in his hand as he sat himself back up. Despite his somewhat blurred vision, courtesy of his tears, Subaru could still clearly see what he grabbed hold of.

Petra's dagger, stained with only small drops of her blood.

He grasped the hilt with both hands, his grip around it tightening as the pointed end met the skin of his throat. His Authority, sensing an imminent threat to his life, made his head ring, more intense than ever before.

This was the only way.

He'd save her.

He wouldn't fail again.

Without hesitation, he deactivated Third Shift as the blade pierced his skin.

"SUBARU!"

The sudden scream erupted throughout the alleyway, echoing against the walls and interrupting the fight between the half-elf and former Witch. Both girls pushed one another away, their heads quickly turning toward the one who called the name of the one they held so dear.

Simultaneously, their eyes widened at the sight. On the ground lay Subaru, blood spurting out from his neck with a bloodied dagger gripped tightly in his hands. Louis had been the one to yell his name, rushing over to him right away and knocking the dagger out of his grasp.

Pandora immediately abandoned the fight. Her mind failed to even think about Emilia at all anymore. The only thing that raced through her mind was the condition of her Subaru.

Not even a moment later she appeared by his side, putting her hands on his chest as she began using her Authority in an attempt to save his life.

Emilia was shell shocked, unmoving in where she stood. Her eyes stared ahead at Subaru's body, blank and unfocused as her thoughts went ballistic. Only when tears rolled down her cheeks did she snap back to reality.

A sense of unanticipated clarity filled her mind. It rapidly opened up to the world, taking in everything around her. She fell to her knees, unable to keep herself standing any longer.

Her palms covered her face, the gravity of everything weighing heavily upon her mind. She thought of every event that led to this.

It was as if the madness in her mind dissipated, allowing her to think clearly. Because of that, unending guilt began to well up within her as she wallowed on her knees.

What had she done...?

She'd hurt people.

She'd tortured and almost killed Beatrice.

She'd *killed* Petra.

Now she was about to be the cause of Subaru's death, too.

The same person that saved her — the same person that *she* wanted to save — was now lying nearly dead on the ground in front of her. She was such a *failure*.

Pandora was panicking at his side. Why wasn't it working? Her Authority could change the events of anything, so why wouldn't it work?!

"Natsuki Subaru never stabbed himself."

Nothing.

Again...

"Natsuki Subaru never stabbed himself."

Nothing.

Again, again...

"*Natsuki Subaru never stabbed himself!*"

Nothing.

Pandora grit her teeth, repeating the process over and over again but receiving the same result each and every time. She didn't know what else to do, a void in her soul beginning to overwhelm her as she droned on.

She suddenly froze. Her eyes felt weird... as did her cheeks.

What... What was that sensation? They felt wet.

A hand reached up to feel under her eyes, her index finger making contact with a single droplet before pulling away. When Pandora looked at her finger, seeing its dampness, she could feel the repeated sensation of multiple droplets falling from her eyes and down her cheeks.

So... these were tears? This is what it felt like to cry?

Behind her, Beatrice finally had the strength to bring herself up. It took a while, but she'd been able to heal herself just enough to sit up.

Her eyes immediately tracked to the body of her friend, eyes widening and heart breaking at the sight. She couldn't believe it, at first. A part of her wanted to think that what she saw was nothing but the delusions of a deceased spirit, but the pain she still unendingly felt proved otherwise.

Right after that, she caught sight of her contractor's body. Her broken heart shattered into millions of pieces, seeing his bloodied form and the similarly bloody dagger that was used to do it resting nearby.

Without wasting a second, Beatrice searched within herself, desperately looking for the one thing that had kept her together for the last ten years. The anguished hopelessness which shrouded her corroded soul only served to make her look harder.

Freezing, she widened her eyes in shocking surprise. She felt something. It was still there; there was still hope!

Out of the corner of her eye, something snapped forward. Beatrice quickly shot her head toward Emilia, who still wallowingly knelt on the ground.

However, something was off. It didn't take long for her to notice the ice quickly spreading out from under her, rapidly snapping itself forward in all directions. Beatrice knew what would happen if left alone any longer.

Emilia's emotions were too much, overwhelming her and causing her magic to go out of control. What happened in Eltor Forest over one-hundred years ago would happen again, only this time she'd end up freezing most of the capital.

Quickly, a resolve formed itself within her accursed soul. Despite her physical deformations, she was still the Great Spirit that contracted the great Natsuki Subaru!

She failed to protect him once, so she would not fail again. She would make sure of that. It was her turn to do what was right.

As the half-elf cried, beginning to scream out in anguish with the ice ever expanding underneath her, Beatrice used all of her strength to rise to her feet. She quickly shot herself forward, her right hand dragging itself across the ground and picking something up before she latched herself around Emilia's back.

With the sudden weight of Beatrice being thrust into her, Emilia's body slightly recoiled forward. The girl's mind barely registered it, though; she was too consumed by her inner emotions and sadness to realize what was really going on around her.

As the half-elf's frozen tears fell and broke on the ground, ice began to crawl its way up Beatrice's body. Emilia's body radiated the temperature she expelled, freezing the Great Spirit whole.

Beatrice grit her teeth, feeling the cold of absolute zero. She narrowed her eyes, determined to carry out her resolve to the end.

"Betty will not let you or I harm him ever again!"

Tears of her own broke from her eyes, extending her right hand out in front of both Emilia and herself. The object finally took the half-elf's attention, immediately recognizing what the Great Spirit held within her hand.

The Seal of Eternity.

Before she even had a chance to act, Beatrice's thumb swiped across the stone's center. The symbol, once dim, began to glow brightly in her palm. Then, in an instant, the two were gone. With nobody left to hold it, the seal fell to the ground, landing with an echoed clang before it soon settled.

Finally, that left Pandora and Louis alone. The former continued to remain beside the body of the only person she ever loved. Tears unrelentingly continued to break free from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks and falling onto Subaru's unmoving form beneath her.

Her mouth quivered, her hands removing themselves from his chest as they began to violently shake. She turned them over, looking at her own palms as her heart went into overdrive. Her pupils dilated, eyes staring deeply at an invisible void while quiet whispers of her own voice flooded into her mind.

She wanted to die. *She wanted to die.* **She wanted to die.**

Die, Die, *Die*, *Die*, **DIE!**

With breath shaky, her quivering mouth turned into a gritting snarl. Her hands clenched into shaking fists while memories, the only good memories she had, replayed in her head.

This world, as cruel as it was, took away the one thing that gave her true, genuine happiness; the one thing that pushed her to change, to be a better person.

Now, she had nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was all gone, snatched away for no reason other than spite.

The world wanted her to suffer, to be miserable.

She was truly, completely, utterly alone.

In the middle of wallowing in her thoughts, her gaze suddenly hardened. Her head straightened itself by looking forward, her body rising from the ground. She slowly turned around, revealing her snarling face full of tears to the light.

She wanted to die, so it would be made true. She would make them kill her; she would do whatever it took to make that happen.

Whatever it took.

...

Soon, she would reunite with him in death.

But first, she'd make them all feel her pain.

If she wasn't allowed to be happy, then nobody did.

***Chapter 11*: Pandora — Just Pandora**

Hello there!

I'm not dead, nor have I abandoned this story! Truthfully, I've been having extreme burnout and the motivation to write just wasn't there for some time. Even now, I'm still struggling with it quite a bit.

However, I've got a good amount of content here for you! While this chapter is significantly shorter than ones I've posted as of late, it's only because it's been split up!

Essentially, this is how it'll go. I have a total of 4 chapters for you. Two are done and the other two are in progress. I'll be trying to release them consecutively every week.

I'm pretty excited to get through this arc with you all. Special thanks to Sam (qwerty19) for helping with everything! This would've likely not been done on time if it weren't for you!

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this and the coming chapters!

Chapter 11: Pandora — Just Pandora

~A Millennia Ago~

"Woah," Subaru uttered, his tone low and quiet as he slowly digested all of the information that he had just received.

The girl at his side didn't move her head, keeping it angled down toward what could be considered the floor, the darkness around it doing nothing to decorate her eyes. However, she used her eyes to look at him in a side-glance. "Are you not going to say anything?" she asked, tempting him to do just that.

Subaru laughed, but it was hardly humorous. "I don't think I can, really," he said, his head turning to the side, looking at her with a sympathetic expression. "You've been through a lot."

"Mhm," she hummed, nodding her head just a little bit.

In all honesty, Pandora had no idea as to what Subaru would think of her now. After revealing her entire life's story, along with many of the atrocities that she'd committed over the course of her four-hundred-year-old life, she greatly believed that he'd go back to detesting her.

"I can't say, I'm sorry you went through all of that stuff," he said, much to her expectations. She'd also expected him to follow up that statement with an insult, but, instead, he said something else. "That kind of response would be really cliché and unmeaningful. It wouldn't be right for your situation."

As Subaru humorlessly chuckled at his words, Pandora moved her head to better look at him. Her lips slightly parted in a show of shock but soon closed when he refocused on her.

"Honestly, I don't blame you for some of that stuff. If I was in your situation, I'm sure I might've lost it, too," he admitted, looking down at his free hand. In the moment of silence, he clenched and unclenched it as if contemplating the possibilities in his head.

"You do not... think it is bad?" Pandora asked him, the hesitancy clearly shown in her voice as she looked at him nervously.

"Oh, no, it's all pretty bad," he responded, his eyes trailing back to her. "A lot of the stuff you did was messed up in ways I'd rather not say. That, I can't deny."

Pandora's expression quickly became downcast. She knew it. He would denounce her next, leaving her to suffer alone once more.

"But," he suddenly said, making her perk up, "like I said, I understand. I get why you became that way." He paused, taking a breath of whatever 'air' was in the void with them, "Plus, I know that wasn't *really* you."

Confusion overcame her in that moment, unsure as to what he was talking about. Tilting her head, she asked, "What do you mean?"

A small smile appeared on his face. "Well, just look at yourself. Does this," he used his free hand to gesture to her, "really resemble how you were back then, or even when we first met?"

Pandora didn't answer right away. Her eyes lagged, shifting themselves around to various random areas as various thoughts crept into her mind. Eventually, she found the answer that she was looking for.

He was right.

She considered herself foolish. How could she not have realized it sooner?

No, that wasn't right, was it? She did realize it — she did know — but she never wanted to face it. When she fell and decided to walk the path of the Witch, she never wanted to believe that there was a way out for her. She never wanted to believe that there was, or could be, a difference.

"But I am still a horrible person," Pandora quickly attempted to counter. While her words were directed at Subaru, challenging his conclusion, they were also directed at herself. A part of her still tried to deny it, despite seeing the truth which laid before her. She continued, "Does that not dissuade you?"

To her surprise, Subaru let out a light chuckle, "Nobody is ever born bad." His face shifted something akin to neutrality yet resonated a small, yet sad, smile, "Usually, it's one event or another in someone's life that puts them on that type of path."

Pandora thought that, perhaps, Subaru was comparing her situation to others who had fallen to such paths in his world. When he had told her of his world's history, she could not help but liken the more catastrophic events to her own conquest, which did not help her gain a positive view of herself.

But still, he'd told her many stories over the course of their time together. Notably, he'd described tales of heroes and villains from his world's fiction. Pandora liked those stories and, whenever possible, would request that he tell her more.

Many of them stuck with her.

In particular, she found a special connection with tales in which the hero became the villain. A force of the light becoming a servant of the dark. She could not help herself but to compare those scenarios to her own.

When one such hero turned into a villain, it was typically because an event, or multiple, triggered it to occur. Betrayal, abandonment, neglect, tragedy, torture, the need to save someone whom they loved; they were all reasons as to why they may become, for lack of a better term, "bad".

Interestingly, there were cases where those villains would become good again. That was what truly boggled her mind. If you became evil — if you committed such horrendous deeds — didn't that lock you into that path forever? Wasn't there little hope of redemption?

Or was that wrong?

Did those types of scenarios even apply to her?

"You're thinking about those stories I told you about, aren't you?" Subaru asked, or, more accurately, confidently stated, with a small smile.

Pandora's face has involuntarily gone red, a bit embarrassed at the fact that he'd read her thoughts so easily. "How were you aware?"

"I've just become more of an expert at understanding you, I suppose," he revealed with some pride. Pandora actually pouted a bit, which made him laugh. "Well, I also saw that look on your face. You had the same expression when I first told you some of them."

"Ah." Well, that explained it. She shook her head, averting her gaze to the side. "And what of it? It is not as though they matter."

"Really? I believe that they do, and I'm sure you believe so, too."

Pandora scoffed at that, but she still kept her face pointed away. It wasn't because it was untrue, but because he'd, once again, perfectly read her like an open book. It was a new feeling for her, in all aspects. She wasn't used to people... understanding her.

"How?" she mumbled, her voice just barely loud enough for Subaru to hear it.

"Let's think about it," Subaru proposed, looking at her despite her eyes not looking back at him. "You lived in isolation during your childhood because of your Authority, not that it really helped with what it caused. You never had a solid grasp on your emotions or feelings. Things were out of your control. Then, well, tragedy struck. All of those things got rolled into one."

"And what meaning do those details have?" Pandora finally directed her eyes toward him, urging him to answer the question.

Subaru didn't answer. Rather, he kept his thoughts to himself for a moment, deciding to wait before speaking again. Pandora didn't know why.

In all honesty, his argument was beginning to frustrate her. However, her actual frustration wasn't really at him, nor was it at the words that he was saying. In truth, she was frustrated at herself for being unable to understand the message that he was trying to convey.

She continued to ask questions, trying to prompt him into responding, "Can you not answer that? Those details change absolutely nothing about me. I slaughtered the entire village without care."

He nodded, acknowledging those deeds as she said them. Finally, he verbally responded, "You did. I'm not denying that."

"Then what difference does it truly make?" Pandora fired back.

"You broke," Subaru immediately responded, his voice low and foreboding. "What little things you held onto were taken away. Then, to make things worse, the things you experienced after completely shattered your mind."

The door to a rather simple home was forcefully kicked down, with men of various stature securing the premises. Some wore expressions of fear and nervousness, while others looked angry and filled with fury. A few of the men carried their own makeshift weaponry, all of which were pointed directly at what appeared to be an ordinary, teenage girl. However, the men were not to be fooled, quickly surrounding the girl and holding their weapons out in precaution.

The girl sat on her knees, her face blankly staring ahead at two motionless bodies: a man and a woman, holding one another in an embrace, dead and cold.

They were her parents. The girl knew this. How could she not? She was the one that killed them, after all.

They'd sheltered her, cared for her, despite the hardships that she had brought since her birth. They'd kept her safe against the many people after her head. They'd helped her try to learn, to live a somewhat normal life, yet this was where their efforts brought them?

They saw Pandora as their daughter, yet she killed them.

Pandora didn't understand anything. She constantly questioned everything, trying to understand what happened and why. But nothing that ever came to mind stuck.

The only thing she could understand was that it was her fault.

She killed them. It was all her fault.

The fact that she shed no tears upon seeing their bodies, or even upon remembering their kindhearted goodness to her, only further proved her vileness to the men around her.

One man struck her in the head with the blunt end of the tool he carried, causing her to reel back and hit the floor. She didn't resist.

They wasted no time in whaling on her in almost every fashion they could. They kicked her, punched her, elbowed her and repeatedly struck her with their weapons. The men which possessed sharp weapons sliced her body in multiple different areas of her body, causing shallow and deep lacerations alike.

Though her mind was already dazed, the overwhelming pain of their inflictions drove it to become blank. She could hardly think or register anything anymore. Only two sensations remained.

The intense feeling of cold, only ever interrupted but the warmth of her own blood, was prominent. The immense want — desire — to die in that moment would stick with her forever.

They wanted to torture her. They wanted her to feel their anger and pain over her very existence.

At this point, she started to believe that she deserved it.

She didn't want this. She didn't want any of these things to happen, but the curse she was born with would always make it so.

She didn't notice when they stopped beating her.

They had someone with an affinity for water magic present, so they healed her. Not fully, of course, but just enough to where she was able to gather a sense of mind again.

Her brain could barely focus as they yanked her up and forced her on her feet. She was made to walk out of her home, outside into the evening air. The wind was fierce, almost making a mark against her through the strips of shredded cloth she now wore. The still wind stung, but she kept moving.

As she walked, her eyes wandered. The small village in which she lived was ever so lively, an audience having gathered to witness the next transpiring event. The girl even noticed a few kids cowering behind their guardians for protection, looking at her as if she were the devil.

She couldn't feel her legs, yet she mindlessly walked until they reached the village center. A hastily built stake had been erected in the roundabout, the men forcing her up to the podium and quickly tying her in place.

There the girl stood, bruised, battered and vulnerable as many surrounded her. The breeze constantly brushed against her body, yet she never shivered or grit her teeth. Instead, she just stood there, her head merely flicking up to those around her before lowering back down.

The village elder stepped forward, his face laced with a strange eagerness to proceed. "At long last, we rid ourselves of the devil!"

The audience yelled in agreement, shouting slurs and insults without fear of repercussion.

"No more will we be made to endure the hardships caused by her curse!"

They cheered.

"No more will we suffer from the curse of this *Witch*!"

They excitedly cheered.

"No more will we starve! No more will we injure or perish at the hands of the unnatural! With the death of the accursed devil, our lives will prosper once more!"

They vigorously cheered.

A young man with a lit torch approached, handing it to the elder before stepping back down into the audience. As the elder turned around, making his way toward Pandora, she couldn't help but reflect on her life.

She had been an unnatural baby, seemingly unable to cry even at birth. After her birth, her curse became vastly prominent. The village became drowned in misfortune, numerous disasters striking and causing the residents to suffer in various ways.

Storms would tear houses off of their foundation, collapse trees and destroy everything. Mabeasts would stray off of their unusual hunting trails and forests to attack their village. Trade routes would mysteriously become blocked or lost, leading to a loss of food and supplies. Many people sustained injuries, suffered and died.

As she was the only baby born there in years, all while possessing a foreboding aura, the blame for such events was obvious.

Despite everything, her parents had cared for and protected her. Her curse had killed them. She had killed them.

As the elder tossed the torch and the fire burned, it spread and set her body ablaze. The coldness of the breeze completely vanished, replaced by a suffocating heat that consumed her whole.

She screamed, her head reeling back as the flames caressed her skin. It hurt. It hurt so much. She wanted to die.

But then, suddenly, it didn't hurt anymore. The pain vanished. The heat vanished, replaced by the chilling cold that she had felt earlier. It seemed as though she would get her wish.

The girl took her last breaths, her mouth agape while her eyes endlessly stared into the smoke-filled sky.

She died.

Then, she was back.

It was jarring. She held no understanding of the feelings that she had just experienced. Everything she felt then was just suddenly replaced by nothing. Her mind was filled with an intense sense of clarity.

The girl's mind had fallen apart. The feeling of death had tainted her.

She stood not too far from the cheering circle of villagers. They hadn't noticed her, but she noticed them. When her eyes landed on the elder, his words ran through her head once more.

Devil. Witch. Those were the names he, and many others, called her by, were they not?

With her mind as haywire as it was, the clarity turned into an unbridled and unrestrained focus. The girl who held care and regret was gone. Instead, she embraced those names.

If she was truly a devil, a *Witch*, then she would play the part.

A joyless smile grew upon her face, her feet taking small steps forward until she reached the closest man. Her arm thrust itself forward, interrupting the man's cheers in favor of choked and bloodied gurgles.

The action gathered the attention of the people next to him, inciting a chain reaction which alerted the whole crowd. The girl's arm penetrated through the man's chest, his heart held in her hand which stuck out his other side. With one squeeze, it exploded in a burst of blood which splattered on him and those nearby.

Screaming and panic ensued. As the girl retracted her arm, letting the body fall lifelessly to the ground, others attempted to flee. Despite this, the girl hardly cared. Her empty, joyless smile persisted nonetheless.

The slaughter began. The girl went, one by one, to each and every villager, mercilessly ending each of their lives. Men, women and children... none were spared.

Pandora grabbed their heads, digging a hand into their back and ripping out their spines. She remembered disemboweling a woman before strangling her husband with the intestines she'd just ripped out. She remembered tearing the limbs off of a child before ending with his head.

Anyone that tried to escape into the surrounding forest would end up coming back, always seeming to enter a maze with no exit except the entrance. They were always met with a brutal death upon their re-emergence.

Anyone who attempted to hide was snuffed out. People betrayed one another, giving away hiding positions or throwing other people into the Witch's path so that they may be spared. It changed nothing.

Anyone who attempted to fight back did not stand a chance. It was not that they failed to strike her — no, each time they did, she always came back. Any injury she received was nothing to her. If they managed to kill her, she would only reappear a second later and kill them with their own weapon.

When night finally struck, the village was painted red. The only light which remained illuminating the village was the moon and the fire which caused her first death. In the darkness, bodies littered the soil and watered the grass with their blood.

After so much carnage, her body remained clean and untainted by the impurities which stained the world. Not even the grains of dirt stuck to the soles of her feet.

The girl's expression never shifted. When all was done, she found and tore a simple cloth from its stand and used it to cover her form.

The breeze attacked her, though ineffective, as her legs moved on their own. Her body moved toward the treeline, crossing over and into the woods within.

The Witch of Vainglory was born in blood, now set loose upon the world, with many more atrocities to follow.

Pandora let out a wavering breath, shaking her head as if to rid herself of the memories. "I still do not see the point of this," she begrudgingly commented. "I mercilessly slaughtered those people. Everyone. Even the children. I felt nothing when I ripped them apart, piece by piece. I felt nothing upon their deaths. *Nothing*."

She intentionally spoke those chilling words, trying her best to waver his resolve. Subaru stayed quiet, however, with Pandora unsure as to what he was thinking.

She had not shied away from any details when telling him her story. She was honest, almost brutally so, specifically describing everything that she'd done that night to him in ways that would stick with him forever.

"Is it not despicable?" Pandora mockingly inquired. "I am a detestable being. I am unworthy of my very existence — a villain unworthy of redemption, contrary to what those stories often describe."

Subaru was still silent for a good while. It wasn't as though Pandora actually expected him to respond at all, or at the very least, if he did, she would've thought that he'd agree with her statements.

However, he did the opposite, breaking the silence by simply saying, "I disagree."

"How?" Pandora quickly asked in return, her tone snarky in a way that showed her blatant disagreement.

"What you did was wrong, there's no doubt about that," Subaru admitted, casting a single side-glance to her before he decided to continue. "But you were never actually bad. You just had some... rather unfortunate circumstances."

Pandora resisted the urge to scoff at that. "Unfortunate" was putting things lightly.

"I mercilessly slaughtered an entire village of people," she reiterated the point once more, as if to remind him.

Subaru stayed silent, choosing to reflect on her previous words with the ones she'd just spoken. Though, by Pandora's expression, he could easily tell that she was not done yet. Of course, there were a lot of things he wanted to say, but he thought it would be best to keep quiet and hear what else she had to say.

"What they have done to me does not make it excusable," she retorted quickly. "And what of the children? They were innocent, were they not? I still made sure to eliminate them just as brutally as the rest."

Subaru sighed. He gathered his words, genuinely asking her, "Do you really believe that was you? Do you really think that *you* are the one that did all of that?"

"Yes."

"I don't."

Pandora was appalled at that response, "And why would that be?"

"I felt nothing," he quoted. "That's what you told me. When you killed them, you didn't feel a thing. But, now?" He almost laughed at the obviousness of his point, "You're regretful. You say your actions are inexcusable, and you feel guilty. That's a hell of a lot different than feeling nothing, in my book."

His words took a moment to register with her. However, when they finally did, she froze. Her mind went blank as those words bounced aimlessly within her head, as if unable to comprehend them.

"You're speaking to me about it with regret; with remorse," he further specified. "What you described to me earlier reminded me of an emotionless machine. Something that kills for nothing more than a mission, incapable of feeling any kind of emotion. Yet, here you are... sad, guilty, and, most of all, remorseful."

Pandora could only blink, her mind taking in all of those words. She held them close, deeply clinging to them out of fear that they'd go out of reach. Her lips couldn't help but tremble, "I... do not understand..."

As she trailed off, Subaru fixed her with another small, gentle smile, "The you that I'm talking to right now is not the same person from back then. You're different." He paused for a moment, gathering some of his thoughts, "You deny the potential to change and blame yourself because you really believe that it's what you deserve. I know how you feel. I've been down that road a lot, too."

Pandora couldn't help but shake her head. Something in her mind, while desperate to believe, remained in denial, "But that was still me. I still committed those sins. *Me*. It is still always me."

Subaru's eyes looked upon her with a soft, sympathetic gaze, "I'll say it outright. Your Authority was likely the primary reason you fell down that path. It affected your mind and emotions to such an extent your whole life and when everything happened to you it just... took control. I mean, even when you were a kid, it was so powerful that you unknowingly affected the environment and events around you."

She knew that he was right. Her Witch Factor was bestowed upon her at birth, which led to her life being anything but normal. Her mind and emotions were always abnormal.

As far as she was concerned, she was, and always will be, a sociopathic freak.

She shook her head again, as if to get rid of those thoughts. She was still reluctant to accept that Subaru was right.

She acknowledged the fact that he knew more about these types of things than most. It was mainly due to his own knowledge and experience with such situations, which always showed when he gave advice to her.

Still, even with that in mind, Pandora hadn't expected him to be so... thoughtful.

"That was only the beginning," she spoke in a low tone. "I have committed many more atrocities over the course of my long life."

"As you've told me," Subaru said, suddenly fixing her with a stern look. She quickly noticed the change in expression, words following soon after, "Look, Pandora, it only takes one bad day for someone to go down the wrong path; to make a wrong choice. Things like that happen to even the best of us. But what really matters is what we think and do after all of that."

She tilted her head, slightly confused. "I am afraid that I still do not understand..."

Subaru sighed, "Take Meili, for example. She was an assassin. She hurt, tortured and killed people. But, in the end, she was remorseful. She made an effort and changed her ways, even becoming something like an adopted daughter to me."

Pandora, still a bit lost, questioned, "Then, what would that example entail for me?"

"I believe that you can change."

"..."

"Well, to be more specific, I think you already have changed. You just need to realize that and make an effort to stick with it," he told her without any hint of hesitation present

in his voice. "If you let the dark side of you win — if you don't try to fight it and make an effort to change — you'll never climb out of the darkness and into the light."

When he smiled at her with a sense of encouragement, Pandora could only stare. Something stirred within her, both from his words and the smile itself. She had no idea as to what those feelings were, but they were unusually enticing.

Natsuki Subaru. He was able to make her feel things that she never felt before.

She snapped herself out of those strangely alluring thoughts, reminding herself that he was right. He was always right, it seemed. But... that wasn't really bad, was it?

Did she even deserve to change? Despite being capable of doing so, did her sins outweigh the path to redemption? Pandora believed so. Of course, the village massacre was still only the start.

She recalled manipulating the fates of each Witch of Sin. It was her who had entrapped the Witch of Gluttony within an endless loop of the desert, leading her to starve and perish. It was her that planted the idea of the Priestella water trap into the citizen's minds, which later had been used to ensnare the Witch of Pride.

It was her that led to the death of every Witch of Sin, all so that she could gather their Witch Factors.

She had a part to play in the Great Calamity. She had manipulated Satella, the lover of the former Great Sage, into taking the Envy Witch Factor and destroying half of the world.

She'd hijacked the former Witch Cult, reforming it into a violent organization of death. Pandora had granted them the freedom to run amok, uncaring for what they did on their own as long as they followed the gospel's command.

She'd even given her Archbishops the Witch Factors that she'd previously stolen, or coerced them into absorbing it themselves.

There was also the confrontation in Eltor Forest, where Pandora had mentally tormented the half-elf girl which Subaru himself held so dear. She had taken away the girl's parental figures, turning them both into insane and ruthless killers. In a way, she believed that some sick and twisted part of herself enjoyed that day.

She was even involved with the death of the former Sword Saint. Pandora remembered her part in that battle, revoking Theresia van Astrea of her Divine Protections and bestowing them upon her grandson before brutally eliminating her. After that, she brought her corpse back to the world of the living so that it may serve within her cult.

All of those incidents accumulated to the death of innocents. Some were directly killed by her own hands, while others were through the effects of her actions.

She'd kept her emotionless smile through it all, unwavering since the start.

It was all for her goal.

The very same goal which made her go to Natsuki Subaru in the first place. She'd gone to him directly in that dungeon, immediately ridding the area of interference and offering her hand in hopes that he'd join her willingly.

He took her hand, only to intentionally seal them both away within a prison of his own making. An eternal, abyssal void with seemingly no end, yet the space they shared was always limited to the box they sat in.

Thus, they were forced to talk. He'd shared his story, so she shared hers.

Natsuki Subaru knew all of those things about her, yet believed that she could change. Or, more accurately, believed that she had *already* changed. He knew of everything

that she'd done in her life, yet he still believed that she could become better.

What an odd individual, she thought.

When Pandora looked at him, she would sometimes be reminded of her old goal. But, at the same time, she wasn't.

"I know you're scared of opening up, too," Subaru considered with an understanding tone. "People have tried to use or manipulate you before. I really do understand if you have trouble trusting what I'm saying."

What he said was not inaccurate.

During her life, especially at the beginning, there were always people who tried to manipulate her. She always knew better, though. Such people that attempted things like that were always executed.

She'd grown tired of being on the receiving end of such treatment, so she became the manipulator herself. She used her curse, or more accurately, her Authority, to her advantage. She's experimented with it, figuring out each of its little tricks and gaining control over all of its core aspects.

Most notably, she would use it to change her appearance to whatever suited her. She'd used this many times over the course of her life, ensuring that nobody who knew of her presence could accurately ascertain her actual looks. It always kept her true nature under the radar of people so keen on looking.

She'd utilized her Authority's natural aspect of attraction to her advantage many times, changing her appearance to a beautiful woman with golden locks. Truly a goddess' form to suit her Authority's natural appeal. It suited well for seducing some individuals, or even coercing them to join the ranks of the cult.

Because, surely, if a goddess chose them for a task, they'd follow, right?

During the attack on Elier forest, she'd merely made herself shorter to seem more approachable to the half-elf Emilia. Surely, if the half-elf believed that she was someone of similar age, she could be more easily convinced to do what she wanted more easily, right?

She'd long since forgotten her original face. The form and body which she had been born with was forever lost in her memory. The earliest form she could remember taking was that of a petite adult woman, sporting abnormal platinum-hair, big ocean blue eyes, and possessing a special radiance that naturally attracted others.

In fact, it was the same form in which she had approached Subaru with and the one she took now. Having been the earliest form she could remember, she considered it her "original". Any other such form were alterations of it, made bigger, smaller, or completely different depending on what circumstances called for which.

But, now, in the midst of her identity crisis, she couldn't help but yearn to know her true original form. It was a strange desperation and necessity that she couldn't explain. In a way, in the form she took now, she didn't feel whole. She did not feel like herself.

... Perhaps what Subaru said held a lot of merit, after all.

Pandora snapped herself out of those thoughts. She'd derailed from her previous mindset. Though, if anything, the thoughts concerning her form and identity made her wonder why he was inciting her potential lack of trust in him instead of it being the other way around.

"I trust you," she said, her tone soft. Pandora was surprised at that; she'd never heard it so light and gentle before.

He gave her a light smile, "I'm glad."

She knew that he was being genuine. She'd learned enough about him to know that he wouldn't lie about something like this nor would he try to manipulate her.

She felt as though she could deeply trust him, despite having originally hated him after their initial sealing together. They were forced to open up to one another, to talk and share their experiences in order to delay the inevitable fall to insanity. He was always honest with her, despite the initial hesitancy.

After a while, she began to feel strange in regards to him. She didn't understand it at all. Something about him was just so... appealing and likable.

Her emotions erupted in ways that she couldn't possibly understand. When they'd joined hands for the first time, despite being unable to physically feel the contact, Pandora's heart raced seemingly all on its own.

Soon enough, she found herself more and more enthralled by him. She wanted to know more about him, out of complete genuine interest. She found herself both interested and nervous over his thoughts on certain things, caring about his opinions and feelings on each subject at hand.

Pandora *never* had this happen to her before. She knew that, yet she *embraced* it.

That was why she was so scared after revealing everything to him. Her feelings, though as unknown as they may be, were strong and largely gravitated toward him in a sense she couldn't fathom.

Though... she was never sure if he felt that way, too.

Pandora had to snap herself out of those thoughts. She was getting distracted, resolving herself to figure out her own feelings later.

For now, she looked at him with uncertainty clear in her gaze, "How are you so certain that my Authority will not thwart any attempt I make?"

With one simple look at her, he responded, "You don't think you can do it."

Pandora continues to look at him, a bit confused. She believed that her question was logical and sound — something to be reasonably concerned about. Subaru, however, chose to look deeper within and found the true meaning behind her question.

"How did you..."

"Your expression," he stated simply, surprising her. "You look sad, scared, worried..." he trailed off, but his lips once again curved into a confident, sure smile, "It's full of emotion."

She stiffened. He was right again, wasn't he?

Even in her own attempts to push his resolve to the edge, she couldn't help but keep proving herself wrong.

"You see it too now, can't you?" Subaru asked, almost pleading. "You're different, because this," he poked her chest with his index finger, "is not who you said did all of those horrific things."

"Then..." she trailed off, looking at him with questionable eyes. "Who am I?"

"You are whoever you want to be," he said back. "I know you think of yourself as the villain of the story. I think of myself the same way, sometimes. But you have the power to turn that around." His eyes softened, looking at her with a certain aspiration for her as he continued, "You don't have to be the hero, or anything like that, but you can definitely be better than the villain you believe you are."

Her eyes widened as a sense of realization finally struck her. When those words reached her ears, she held onto them with the intent of never letting go. Her heart skipped a beat, her mind constantly bouncing multiple different feelings through her head. Those words meant *everything* to her.

But still, she held doubt. Pandora narrowed her eyes at nothing, slightly shaking her head from side-to-side, "I do not think that I can do it. I have been alone for my entire life. I have nothing to hold on to and I have nothing to keep me from losing myself again."

"Then you won't be alone," he reassured her, raising their conjoined hands into view. "I'll be by your side, every step of the way. I'll be the anchor that holds you down. We'll stick together through thick and thin."

A sense of hopefulness swelled within her, something which had never happened before. The feeling was foreign, but she liked it. She wanted this feeling to stay.

Maybe this was what she needed after all of this time.

With her eyes conveying that newly found hope, she desperately asked, "You will not leave?"

"I promise that I won't." He kept smiling at her as if to once again reassure her that he was confident in his words and wasn't going anywhere. "I know that *you*, who I'm talking to right now, is the real you. If I have to, I'll remind you everyday until it sticks."

Pandora simply nodded with a show of acceptance and appreciation, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Subaru responded. "Now it's your turn to promise me. Will you make an effort to truly change?"

Her mind rapidly contemplated everything that led her to this moment, her head averting while her eyes continuously stared ahead. After a few moments of silence, she snapped out of her inner thoughts. She clung onto the words she wished to say within her head, but she struggled to get them out.

At long last, she found the will to speak the words she'd long since desired to say. The words which would pivot her entire life from now into the future flowed from her mouth. "I promise. I will do my best to become better."

At that, Subaru smiled in such a way that could brighten the eternal void around them. "Great! It's set in stone now, no going back. You're locked in."

Pandora didn't exactly know why, but she felt her lips begin to curve up. It was nothing like the cold, emotionless smile she had possessed in her past. This one was genuine, full of feeling and life.

It was another one of the many things she'd never done before, with many more to follow.

With that, something inside of her just felt... lighter. After hearing his vow to stand beside her and making her own promise to better herself for the future, it was as if a huge burden had been lifted from her.

She felt... free.

She gazed over at his face, getting another view of his smile. Strangely, her heart fluttered. She could feel a strange sensation of heat flow throughout her body, with her cheeks being the most prominent. Her chest gaped at the sight of him smiling so nicely, a sense of longing filling the hole.

When she looked into his eyes, which would be considered frightening by many, anything revolving around her old goal was thrown away, forgotten in favor of what she

saw in them. The passion and care that he held in those eyes of his sparked something within her.

Natsuki Subaru: the boy that was able to change Pandora. Not for the worse, but for the better.

He was unique, unlike anyone she'd ever encountered before. His wise words to her moments ago let her see a new light within her internal darkness, one that she never knew was there.

Again, her heart fluttered and her stomach churned with a wistful sense of longing. It was then that something in Pandora's head clicked, finally holding some understanding of what she was feeling.

With all of the stories Subaru told her, some of them included the sense of love, as well as what it felt like. Subaru himself had even detailed those feelings to her.

Nevertheless, the tales of villains becoming better because they found love, choosing to change mostly because of them, held their own sense of fascination for her.

Though, she ever once believed that to be possible. Pandora largely believed that such events were purely the work of fiction, as the stories told. Such things would be outlandish and implausible, especially for someone as vile as her.

But, now?

She couldn't help but think otherwise.

...

Was this what it truly meant to love someone?

~Present Day~

Hardened eyes looked toward the exit of an alleyway, the light from the exit shining upon the snarling face of a platinum-haired girl within. She stood there unmoving for a few moments, her expression unchanging.

She could feel her own tears trace down her cheeks. It was a foreign feeling, one that wouldn't stop. They just kept coming, and coming, and coming. She felt them as they dropped from her chin, either staining her clothes or splashing onto the ground below.

She took a step. Then, another; and another. She walked forward, her stance wobbled and her back slouched as she made her way toward the light.

"W-Wait! Where are you going? You... You can't leave them here! Not like this!"

The sudden exclamation made the girl stop. Her stance remained frozen, the sounds of her uneven breaths being the only thing heard in the alleyway itself. Then, suddenly, her back straightened.

CRACK!

In the blink of an eye, the girl appeared in front of the blonde one. A loud and pained gasp erupted from the other girl's mouth, hitched breaths immediately following.

She whimpered, her expression dawning one of fear as they gazed upon the expressionless face of her attacker. She began to cough and choke, red liquid spewing from her lips as it became increasingly harder to breathe.

Then, there was the sharp pain in her abdomen. The crack she had heard was the sound of her own bones breaking and shattering from the impact.

She was barely even able to look down to see the girl's arm reaching right into her stomach, covered in her own blood. The sight almost made her faint. She could feel it inside of her, digging around her insides and grabbing hold of something it was never meant to grab.

Then, it was pulled out. It was slow, drawn out in a way that would inflict more pain. The blonde girl had to watch as the bloodied hand made itself visible again, her own intestines locked in its grip. She could feel the very moment it disconnected from her body.

Her head was light and the pain was near intolerable. With her eyes open, she collapsed to the ground with an audible thud. She quickly lost consciousness, her mind agonizingly fading into the realm of darkness.

The blonde girl was dead.

The platinum-haired girl showed no reaction. She merely looked down at her enclosed fist, staring at it for only a second before choosing to crush the intestine within its grasp. It exploded under the pressure, excess blood spraying across the alleyway.

She barely paid it any mind. Any blood that stuck to her skin vanished soon after. The only thing which remained stained was her clothing. In a way, it continued to bring sadness to her otherwise emotionless heart. Her tears, similarly, would never cease.

Though, she supposed the blood acted as a reminder. It was something which would always tell her who she was, and always would be.

Her eyes glanced back to the light. The shadows of people walking by were apparent, but doing near nothing to phase her. In fact, to her, it was a good thing. She quickly began to continue her march forward, coming ever so closer to the exit.

She could feel nothing, but yet she felt so much pain; so much sadness. Her heart ached, tormenting her as it churned longingly in her chest.

The one who could make that pain go away was gone. He was wrongfully taken away from her.

He promised... didn't he? Yet, he was still gone. He left her. She was alone, now.

Was she not allowed to be happy? To love; to care? Was she always destined to follow this path?

Her urge to die had only grown, as did her desire to make them understand. She wanted them to feel her pain; her anguish.

Soon enough, both wishes would become true.

They would all feel but a mere fraction of the pain she currently suffered. That would be her scant mercy to them.

Then, after that, she would find peace in death. One way, or another. Her beloved was waiting for her, after all.

As she stepped onto the streets, a villain emerged reborn.

***Chapter 12*: Natsuki Subaru**

Hello there! I'm back with the next chapter!

A lot of you were disappointed about the last chapter which... I can get. The flashback wasn't the transition you likely would've expected, but it was necessary for both plot and pacing reasons. There's a lot of messages, even some hidden, and symbolism in there. Though, I will say, I never did intend to immediately start off with Pandora's rampage for a variety of reasons, some of which you should start to see.

In any case, from here, things will gradually start to pick up. The next two chapters will have action in them, as well. Overall I'm pretty excited for them.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoy this chapter! I'd love to know what you all think, too!

Chapter 12: Natsuki Subaru

"My Queen!" A man rushed into a particular room, his composure wavering as he tried to catch his breath.

"Finally!" the Queen, Felt, exclaimed from within the room. "You need to tell me what the hell is going on out there!"

The man's gaze surveyed the room as he caught his last few breaths. Inside, having been sitting across from the Queen, was a white-haired woman with notably sharp ears. The man didn't dwell on this observation for long, though. He had a duty to deliver his report to the Queen, so that was what he would do.

"The Capital is under attack," the man breathed out, regaining more of his composure as his stamina slowly returned.

"No shit," Felt deadpanned, an arm gesturing out toward a very large window. Through it, one could see most of the city, various buildings visibly producing trails of smoke which rose into the sky. The sight made it clear that circumstances were anything but good. "I want to know *who* the *fuck* is attacking!"

The man winced, both at the state of his Capital and the Queen's harsh tone. His eyes looked at her downcast and almost reluctant, his head similarly lowering itself in a show of submission. "Yes, my Queen," he began. "Sightings are limited. There have been no clear indications as to who, or what, our attacker may be. But..."

Felt's eyes narrowed at him as she approached. Her expression was stern and unwavering, a clear indication to show that she meant business. "But *what*?"

He gazed up at her, "But... From those that have caught glimpses, and from the destruction caused, we believe it to be *her*." He paused, taking a moment to take in a staggered breath, "The Witch."

Felt's expression shifted, albeit slightly. A slight show of nervousness had crept in, but was immediately overshadowed by her serious resolve. The elf, which had been sitting quietly in the back, shifted uncomfortably in her spot.

"Which one?" Felt asked in a deep, serious tone of voice.

With another staggering breath, the man responded, "The Witch of Vainglory."

"Where is Reinhard?" Came the Queen's immediate response.

"He is not responding to any of our metia calls," the man replied, his stance beginning to waver at his own words. "He had confirmed his arrival only moments before the attack, but after that... nothing."

"Bring Julius Juukukius here at once!" Felt demanded. Her sudden order startled the already shaken man, making him freeze for a moment. However, Felt was not having it. "Go!"

At her following order, the man quickly tried to find his bearings before barreling out of the doorway, leaving Felt and the elf alone in the room together once more.

Immediately after his departure, the Queen of Lugnica turned on her heels and made her way toward the window. She stopped in front of it, her eyes glaring at the smoke in the distance which only continued to rise.

At that very moment, a loud boom sounded from the city. Felt didn't flinch, nor did she waver, but her eyes further narrowed. A surge of anger swelled within her, her hands gripping in on themselves to the point that it hurt. Another stream of smoke made itself known, further fueling her rage.

In a way, she blamed herself for not predicting such an event. Since learning that Subaru was back the previous day, she should've considered the fact that the Witch had returned as well. Instead, she was too foolishly caught up in her excitement.

Felt: The Foolish Queen. That is what she should be named. Her failure to consider probable events had led to her citizen's deaths. If she ever came to know just how many lives were lost, she didn't know what she'd do to herself.

"Let me fight," a voice sounded from behind her.

Felt didn't turn around to look at the elf, processing her words whilst continuing to look out into the distance. Doing her best to ease the frustrations rising within her, Felt responded, "I know you have history, Fortuna, but you can't."

"Why not?!" Fortuna exclaimed in disagreement. "After what she has done to me, to Emilia, I cannot let her go unpunished."

"She won't," Felt deeply assured. "But you can't leave."

Fortuna's body language shifted, showing her disapproval with the Queen's order. "I can take care of myself."

"I don't doubt that you can, but this isn't any normal fight," Felt remarked, her body finally turning to face the elf in full.

"I have fought her before," the elf argued back, set on her decision and arguing for its favor.

"And in case you forgot, that ended with you becoming an Archbishop against your will," Felt harshly stated, her eyes narrowing as they critically peered into Fortuna's very being.

Fortuna herself, as composed as she normally was, faltered a bit under the Queen's words and gaze. The elf was internally fuming. Learning of Pandora's deeds and survival was something which made her blood boil in pure hatred. Pandora, the Witch of Vainglory, was a monster that didn't deserve to live.

Before Fortuna could argue back once more, a voice sounded from the doorway, "Felt-sama, you requested for me?"

The girl's attention drew to the speaker, their eyes landing on a purple-haired man with a noticeably recently shaved stubble standing. His attire resembled that of a Lugnica Royal Knight, his armor clean, shiny, and, in a way, fresh.

"Julius!" Felt exclaimed, turning from Fortuna and quickly making her way toward him. "Perfect timing!"

Julius only stood still, not even out of breath, worried and confused. He had been about to follow a battalion of knights into the Capital, set on eliminating the threat, before one of Felt's advisory staff hurriedly informed him of the Queen's order.

Felt wasted no time, moving past Julius and out into the hallway. "Both of you follow me," she ordered, not even looking back at them as she moved.

Julius waited silently for a moment, his eyes carefully watching as the elf similarly moved past him. He flanked behind her, following behind both of the girls until they reached their destination.

Felt led them into a very particular room, one which was more secure than others. As the Queen, she was granted access and let the two bare witness to the armory within. Weapons, armor, and more lay stocked within. But that wasn't what they were there for.

She went over to a particular wall, pushing it aside with a surprising amount of ease. Julius had been tempted to help her, knowing full well that a Queen should not be laboring as such, but it seemed as though he'd been too late. By the time he made the move forward, the hidden room was revealed.

To be more precise, it was less of a room and more of a storage closet. Only one thing was stored inside, resting horizontally on its display stand: a sword. When Julius laid his eyes on it, they widened. This sword was unlike all others.

He stepped closer in awe, observing it in any way that he could. The design of the hilt was unique, the blade itself being quite long and completely straight. It emitted an unusual yet impressive aura, which only served to draw him closer to it.

"Is this what I think it is?" Julius asked, his eyes not once letting the sword out of sight.

"It is," came his Queen's response. She looked at him, then at the sword, her eyes soft yet heavy at the same time. "I heard about what happened with your spirit buds, and I'm really sorry. So, I thought that it would be best to give this to you."

Julius felt a sudden weight latch onto him at the memory of his spirits. He did his best to shake those thoughts away, choosing to focus on the now instead of the past. Most of those he cherished were gone, either dead or disconnected from his life.

He needed to move on, but that didn't mean he had to let go. For the ones which remained, he would do his best to find and reconnect. He would protect them, unlike how he had failed to do so in the past.

"Are you certain that I should have something like this?" Julius asked, his hesitancy blatantly apparent on his face and in his voice.

Felt hummed at his side, "I'm sure. It's better off with you than in here collecting dust."

Julius nodded, carefully reaching out his hands. He grabbed hold of the hilt with one hand, the other resting underneath the blade, as he slowly lifted it from its stand. It felt almost as heavy as his sins, but not unbearably so.

His eyes narrowed down at it, taking his hand off of the blade and wielding it from the hilt. He straightened the blade in front of him, feeling the sword's power through its aura alone. He felt a connection to it, in a way.

Julius never once believed that he would wield one of the Ten Swords of Power, much less the Spirit Sword. His spiritual affinity seemed to glow as he held this weapon, reaching out in a call to the minor spirits around him.

He took in a deep breath, then let it out. He felt ready. He was prepared.

Today, he'd make things right.

When Subaru opened his eyes, all he saw was darkness. A void vacant of light. It was very much accustomed to what he'd already seen, from both being within the seal and his own inner mindscape.

It didn't take him too long to realize that he was lying flat on his back. With that realization, he began to sit up, barely resisting the urge to groan as he did so. His body felt incredibly stiff, while at the same time constantly seeming to phantomly ache, which threw him off.

He took his time in getting to his feet, doing his best to gather whatever bearings he had left. A hand drew to his head, his eyes blinking as his mind fumbled over itself.

What had happened, again?

He had a hard time drawing specific details for a moment, struggling to recall what exactly was going on. It was as if his mind had been shut off, only to suddenly turn back on again.

Well, that's what happened to him every time he died, wasn't it?

He paused.

Right, he died. He killed himself with Petra's dagger after she...

Petra...

His expression became one of guilt and remorse, deeply saddened by the events which led to this very moment. He remembered it so clearly, now. The large, bloodied piece of ice that stuck through both her front and back. Her bloodied smile and the words she said to him in her final moments.

"Bel...eve ... in ... y...ou."

He recoiled at the memory. His stance began to waver, his legs wobbling ever so slightly, almost making him fall over. He steadied himself, shaking his head.

This was why he did what he did. He would start over and make sure that fate wouldn't come to pass. He didn't know where he would end up, but he would make it work. He would save them.

"Subaru."

He jumped at the sudden voice, immediately turning in the direction he'd heard it from. Shadows, nearly invisible to the eye, began forming in a kneeling position on the ground in front of him. A humanoid figure made itself known from within, becoming more visible as the shadows marginally moved aside.

Subaru's eyes momentarily widened, his body tensing out of an instinctive caution. He recognized who this was: a half-elf with amethyst eyes and silver hair, commanding terrifying shadows that'd make any normal person shiver with fear.

"Satella," he uttered, his eyes beginning to narrow.

"Subaru."

She only repeated his name, which was a bit surprising to him. At the same time, he was also very relieved. If this was the true Witch of Envy, he'd only be hearing "I love you" on loop. But, at the sound of the almost broken yet gentle voice, he knew that wasn't currently the case.

"There is not much time," she continued, looking up at him with a pitiful expression. It was as though she was trying to plead with him, almost desperately so. Another thing that he noticed was that she looked tired, exhausted even. He could only begin to wonder what was making her feel so burnt-out.

Subaru hesitantly looked around himself for a second before his eyes landed back on her. He felt confident, yet also unsure, enough to ask, "Is this another dream?"

She shook her head, "No. This is not a dream."

Subaru didn't answer right away. If that was true, then he really had died. He supposed that was good, wasn't it?

"I must warn you, lest I lose my chance," Satella quickly followed up in a mumble, preventing Subaru from responding to her previous answer in any way. She gave him a hard, serious look, "The Witch of Envy is coming."

Taken off-guard by the bluntness of her admission, Subaru blinked a few times as he registered her words. "W-What do you mean 'the Witch of Envy is coming'?" he questioned, his tone a bit shaken. "How is that possible?"

"Your dream; that vision," she uttered, her gaze lowering itself as though she refused to meet his eyes. "You saw it. The potential future." She slowly shook her head, as if she were trying to deny everything, "She is very, very angry. I have been doing my best to ward her off, but her arrival is inevitable now. She will break free; it is only a matter of time."

Subaru paused. He remembered it well; the vision of destruction and death. He remembered the screams, the darkness swallowing the world and reaching out for him in turn.

With some further thought, he realized that this was why Satella seemed so exhausted. All of her energy was being put into keeping Envy at bay. He wondered how much energy she was spending just to meet with him now.

Either way, the fact of Envy's return remained. As Satella said, she would free herself from her prison and wreak havoc upon the world. The second Great Calamity would be made out of the Witch of Envy's rage. It was only a matter of time.

"I'm not ready for this," Subaru muttered to himself, his breathing slightly hitched as the gravity of the situation crushed him. The stress of everything was overwhelming to him in that moment, but he still shook his head in a form of desperate denial. The next words he spoke reflected that, "No, it'll be fine. I'll just use Return by Death. It's fine. I have time."

"That's impossible..."

He froze, hearing the soft voice of the Witch in front of him trail off. He slowly raised his gaze, looking at her with an expression very similar to disbelief. A seed of doubt was planted in his mind, a single question escaping from his lips, "How... How is that impossible?"

She looked up at him, regret plastered across her face. At the sight of her expression alone, he felt all signs of potential hope leave him at once. "Your Authority of Envy was always different from mine," she began. "You developed what you call 'Return by Death' from your desire to save Emilia on your first day in this world. But, now..."

She trailed off again, leaving Subaru to stand there basking in his own shock and confusion. He quickly digested the new information, realizing how much sense it actually made. But, from the way she spoke, there was more. He had a feeling that he knew what was coming, and he hated it.

"Now, it's different," she hesitantly breathed out. "Whatever you have done to your other Witch Factors, it has affected your Envy Witch Factor as well. It has been changed, altered into something in which I don't even know." She looked at him, her soft and remorseful eyes becoming more apparent, "I'm sorry."

Subaru's world came crashing down around him. Everything which he had come to know seemed to just be... erased. A new, sudden change was thrust into him out of nowhere and he had no idea of how to deal with it. He had trouble grasping at the truth of it all.

Still, one question repeated in his mind.

He didn't have Return by Death anymore?

He looked down at his own palms, watching as they shook under the immense stress he now felt. "Then... How am I..."

"Your Authority of Lust stabilized you, though you are currently catatonic, " Satella clarified quickly, her tone still soft and even regretful. "Your contracted spirit seemed to have realized this. She willingly sealed herself away with Emilia to prevent her from accidentally killing you."

Subaru only shook his head, the palms of his hands moving to his face as an immense sense of dread overwhelmed him. At first, he tried to deny it. He tried to push away the truth, but, in the end, it always came back. He couldn't escape it, despite how much he wanted to.

Then, one fact became clear: there was no saving Petra.

The girl who'd always looked up to him, smiled at him and wished him good luck, was dead forever. The girl who saw him as a hero — as someone who could save everyone — wasn't saved in time. He couldn't even try again.

He failed her.

Her body, cold, bloodied and motionless on the ground, haunted his mind. That would be his last memory of her, forever and always.

"I-I'm sorry, Subaru." Upon hearing her voice again, he peeked through the gaps of his fingers to once again look at her. With a heavy face, she continued, "There is still more."

He actually found the will to scoff at such a statement. More? How could there still be more? How could things possibly be any worse?

He lowered his hands from his face and looked at Satella with expectancy. The look on his face feigned ignorance, or even denial. However, behind that mask, Satella could see his fear. In a way, she could even sense it.

Her eyes, as soft as they were, stayed on him as her lips parted to speak, "When you... hurt yourself, Pandora thought that she had lost you."

Subaru immediately tensed. He felt a pain somewhere in his chest, something which he felt tempted to clench at. He felt something swallowing away at him from within as he exhaled a sharp, stuttering breath.

Satella continued, "She tried to bring you back, but it didn't work." She could almost cringe at the broken expression he now held on his face. Even so, she pressed to give him the last bits of information he needed to know, "After that, she broke. She is now taking out her rage and grief upon the innocent citizens in the Capital."

Once those final words left her mouth, silence ensued. The void had become almost sedated, devoid of any lasting noise or emotional atmosphere. But that was only temporary.

The silence was broken by a wild stream of chuckles, which were quickly one-upped by humorless laughs. Satella quietly looked on as Subaru fell to his knees, the hopelessness of everything seeping into his very soul. He could only painfully laugh at how horrendously things had turned out.

At first glance, one would've thought him to be insane.

All he could think about was how *terrible* of a person he truly was. He was no hero, and he sure as hell had no right to call himself worthy of anyone's love.

"Subaru."

Petra was dead, gone for good. She was unable to be saved. His own carelessness was what led to her death in the first place.

"..."

Emilia and Beatrice were gone, sealed away just as he once was. It was a direct result of what he had done. If he hadn't been so mindless, then they wouldn't be stuck in an eternal prison.

"... Subaru."

Pandora. Even thinking about her hurt his very soul.

He'd hurt her; betrayed her, even. He promised to stick by her side, to be the anchor that held her down. Then, what did he do? He shoved a dagger straight into his throat while she fought for him, abiding by the promise they made minutes before, mere feet away.

He had no doubt that she had watched as his blood stained the ground. He had no doubt as she watched him die and leave her behind. He had no doubt that she probably thought of him as a liar, someone who betrayed her trust after promising to stay by her side.

He was terrible, wasn't he? One of the shittiest human beings in this accursed world. He single-handedly tarnished any chance at the happy future they discussed so many times.

...

Subaru's head suddenly snapped in place, his body tensing as he felt something grab ahold of his shoulder. It gently rested there, feeling light and almost comforting, in a sense. He was a bit surprised at how much he'd calmed down because of it, having been completely drawn out of his previous mindset.

His eyes faced forward, meeting Satella's. By looking into them, even for just a few seconds, he could see her sadness and disappointment. She frowned at him, those emotions laced in her lips, "Please, calm down and think for a moment."

It was then that Subaru realized that the hand on his shoulder was actually hers. Well, one of her invisible hands, anyway. She was doing her best to try and calm him down, to make him feel more at ease. Unfortunately for the both of them, it seemed as though those effects were only temporary.

Considering her words, he narrowed his eyes. "Think? What do you want me to think about?" he mocked in a low tone. "There is *nothing* to think about. Nothing! I've messed up so much, and there's absolutely no way I can fix it without Return by Death!"

After his exclamation, he took long, deep breaths. He felt exhausted, much more than he normally ever did.

Satella sighed, slowly retracting her invisible hand from his shoulder, which further caught his attention. She looked at him critically, as though she were judging him, "For all of that time you spent sealed away, you are really choosing not to use the wisdom you've gained."

Subaru was confused, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Satella closed her eyes and sighed again, picking up on the subtle edge in his voice. When she opened her eyes, they were noticeably more understanding than they were before, though retained their former softness. "Don't you remember what I told you back at the Tea Party all that time ago?"

He faltered for a moment. "Love yourself," he cited her words from the past, letting out a light scoff at their implications. "I talked about it with Dora, too. How can I ever love myself if all I keep doing is failing and letting people die?"

"This is your problem," she said. Subaru was, once again, confused by her words. Before she spoke again, Satella finally stood from her previously kneeled position. "You choose to let your emotions, doubts, and fears dictate your thoughts and decisions. They blind you."

"How are they just doubts and fears?" Subaru questioned. "They're very real to me."

"I never said that they weren't real," Satella clarified. "I said that you let them dictate your decisions. Your very mindset is altered by these feelings. It makes you do things that you may come to regret."

Subaru was tempted to flinch at that. He knew that she was right in what she was saying. In fact, what she was saying had already happened in more ways than one.

He found himself questioning her again, "So, I can't feel upset when I lose something I love?"

"I didn't say that, either," Satella replied. "To feel upset, to mourn and cry over loss, is normal. But you shouldn't let that affect who you are and the decisions you make."

Once again, Subaru scoffed, "What do you know about loss..."

"Everything."

The next thing he knew, Satella was standing right in front of him, looking at him with the same soft and understanding eyes. He didn't even flinch or step back, merely accepting her advance and realizing the stupidity of his question as he contemplated his response.

"Why are you trying so hard to help me?" he asked.

"Because I love you," was her response. It was smooth, quick and natural off of the tongue.

Still, Subaru wasn't satisfied, "Because I saved you? You said that before; that I held out a hand to you and saved you when you needed it most."

"That's right, you did," Satella confirmed in a tone that was as soft as her eyes.

He critically asked her, "So is this all to get me to love you? Or is this some sort of repayment for me having saved you back then?"

"It's because I want you to save them, now."

Subaru looked at her incredulously. His lips parted as if he wanted to speak, but no words managed to get out. He truly didn't expect that to be the real reason behind Satella's insistence. So, now, he was unsure of how to follow up after hearing a statement like that.

Luckily, he didn't have to. Satella continued to speak, "Tell me, what did the girl, Petra, tell you before she passed?"

Subaru's head tilted off to the side, unwilling to make eye contact as he recalled the girl's words once again. "She wanted me to save 'her'. She said that she believed in me."

"Right. So, why aren't you willing to honor her final wish?"

Subaru was a bit surprised to hear that response, looking up to the Witch with an expression akin to both frustration and sadness. "But Petra is gone," he argued. "How can I honor that when I watched her die? I failed to save her, and I can't even go back to make it right."

Satella let out a huff of air, or, rather, whatever could be associated as air in the place they currently occupied. "Death is an absolute of the universe," she spoke, her voice heavy yet soft at the same time. "It hits us all in different ways. For some of us, we are able to come back... to keep living despite the shadow always looming overhead. It's relentless. But, others... they aren't immune to death forever. Eventually, it will come for them, and there is no stopping it. In the end, it is best to accept this. If we keep holding onto their lives, even after they are gone, it would only destroy us."

Subaru took another shaky breath, his mind somehow a lot steadier than it was before. However, despite that, his mind was still hurt, damaged by the experiences and truths he was forced to bear witness to. Still, that didn't stop him from receiving and understanding her intended message.

He looked at Satella, a knowing yet solemn expression gracing his face, "You're telling me to let go."

"I am," she admitted. "I know it's not easy. Not in the slightest. But you must, if you want to move forward." She paused, taking a moment to let those words sink in before continuing, "You can't turn the tides of destiny of others forever. But, you can do so for your own, all while helping guide others on their paths the traditional way, too."

Subaru relented, his body slowly but surely easing itself as he continued to steady his breaths. He calmed himself, taking the time to digest Satella's words in full. She was right, and he couldn't help but hate it.

All he wanted to do was save everyone. He didn't want anyone to die, especially the people that he cared about. They didn't deserve to perish because of his own foolish mistakes, hence why he always set out to undo them.

Subaru paused those thoughts for a moment, considering something new in the heat of the moment. He was blaming himself, but where did that ever really get him?

The more he contemplated it, the more he realized how stupid he was really being. The more he blamed himself, the more he hurt those around him. Emilia, Beatrice, Petra, Pandora and even Satella now could all see through his fake little mask of happiness. They could see how much he truly suffered on the inside, yet, whenever they tried to help, he would always push them away.

He'd done that again, didn't he? When he was grieving, sad and lost, he chose to cling onto something that wasn't there, isolating himself and acting on his own instead of accepting it and attempting to confide in those around him. As a result, Beatrice and Emilia were sealed away and Pandora began rampaging in the Capital.

Pandora...

The more he thought of her, the more his heart ached. He was filled with immense guilt. His desire to save everyone ironically doomed the one he came to love most.

He failed her, sending her back into the terrible life he pulled her out of. She trusted him, and he betrayed that trust. Now, all he could think about was how he could ever possibly make things right again.

"I really messed up, didn't I," he mumbled to himself. He could only bring himself to apologize from the bottom of his heart, "Pandora... I'm so sorry."

"Start there," Satella spoke up, getting Subaru's attention. "Start with her. Save her."

... What did she just say?

"I'm... I'm sorry, did you just tell me to save her?" Subaru asked, startled in disbelief.

Satella nodded, "Yes. You don't want to?"

Subaru jumped, furiously denying her question, "No, of course I do! I just... didn't expect that from, especially coming from you."

Satella stayed quiet for a moment, taking her time in gathering the words she wanted to say next. "What you have been able to do is extraordinary," she complimented, her expression softening as the words left her mouth. "You were able to change her when nobody else could."

Only giving her occasional blinks, he found himself asking, "Are you saying you... support us?"

She was silent for another long moment, but, soon enough, she found the words she wanted to say, "Yes. You two are... unique, yet very deeply connected to one another. She has helped you, as you have helped her. I accept it."

To say Subaru was surprised was an understatement. He found himself asking another question, one which quickly began to eat away at his mind, "You accept it, even though you love me?"

"Yes," was her only reply to the question.

This time, Subaru was the one that stayed silent. He couldn't help but try and consider Satella's deeper reasons for her bizarre acceptance. Subaru considered that everything may be connected to him, in a way. Since Satella was always so concerned for him, it wasn't too far-fetched to say that she mainly approved because Pandora made sure to take care of him.

With that in mind, Subaru couldn't help but think back to Satella's love for him. This girl was still a mystery to him in a lot of aspects, but a lot of things that he had come to know made things a lot clearer.

Her connection and devotion to loving him was something he realized would never change, but he still felt the sudden need to make sure she knew who *he* was.

He took a breath, looking at her with a complex gaze and expression, "I'm not the same man you fell in love with, nor can I love you in the same way."

"I know," she answered. "I have since learned this. Though you may not love me, I will still always love and support you."

"But, why?" he asked, finding himself more curious than not.

"Because, in essence, you are him. Yet, at the same time, you are also not. You are different," she told him without an ounce of doubt. Her response was confusing, yet it also made sense.

Subaru found himself satisfied with her answer, but, at the same time, he still felt confused. His thoughts became more refined, searching for the answers he so

desperately sought. It wasn't just about what Satella said; it was also about him, and what he was meant to do, as well.

Quickly, he came to understand everything. He held this high value of life, one which extended to even his foes. He desired to save everyone he could, going as far as to end his own life to bring back the lives of others.

But, that was the problem, wasn't it?

He was trapped within himself. He couldn't move past his fear, doubt and self-hatred. He constantly clung to things in hopes that he'd always be able to fix them. It held him back, pushed him down and made some situations even worse. Overall, his state of mind ended up gradually declining into a constant form of depression and guilt. It destroyed him.

Then, that begged the question: how could he save others if he couldn't even save himself?

The answer was that he couldn't. Without first saving himself, he couldn't reliably save others. By not relying on others, he forced himself into unwinnable situations which ultimately led to disaster. By not loving himself, he had ended up hurting those around him. That was something he *never* wanted to happen.

These were things that he needed to rectify.

He had made a promise to Pandora. He should've confided in her and been there for her. He failed to keep that promise due to his own idiotic and selfish mindset. He loved her, yet failed in these crucial aspects. He would change that.

He took another deep breath, searching for the resolve within him to stand tall once again. It didn't take long to find.

He used his will to stabilize it. He thought of those that had fallen, the ones who gave their lives so that the ones which live could keep moving forward. He would be sure to honor each of their sacrifices.

He would honor Petra's last words, especially.

"I'll save them," he suddenly stated, raising his head up high. A look of determination, one which reflected his will, made itself known on his face. "I'll rely on those I love, too. I wasn't fair to them, and I wasn't fair to myself, either."

Though as moderately clumsy as his speech was, it didn't fail to make Satella smile. Her message had truly gotten across to him and, for that, she was happy. As long as he began to genuinely love himself, rely on others, and value the lives of those still living, she would be content with what had transpired during their meeting.

"Your body is just about fully healed," she said, changing the topic and turning herself around in a way which indicated that she was about to walk away. "It is almost time to leave."

"Satella," he quickly called out, his tone having lost some of its former sturdiness, now replaced by something similar to a longing curiosity.

"Yes?"

"In the warning you showed me before, what was in the book?"

Satella stayed silent, seemingly unwilling to answer Subaru's question. Still, though, he waited patiently for a good while in hopes that she would respond, but, as more moments came to pass, it seemed more and more unlikely.

He decided to prompt her, "Satella, what was in that book? What was so important that you wanted to specifically highlight it to me?"

He could hear her let out a breath. She didn't turn around to face him, but she finally answered, "The book was the one of seals, barriers and pocket dimensions. The one highlighted would effectively seal me in a special pocket dimension, one which would forever seal me to an eternal darkness where I would be unable to cause harm to anyone again."

Subaru took in her words, taking his time to digest them. To Satella's surprise, his answer was not the one she was hoping for, "I'm not using that. I'm not going to doom you to suffer in eternal darkness alone."

She finally turned around to look at him again. Though, contrary to what one might have expected, her expression wasn't angry, not even close. Instead, it was more sad, or even disappointed, in Subaru's decision.

"Death may be an absolute, but I'm not going to start accepting it like it's supposed to happen every Monday," he continued. "Pandora needs me first. After that, I'll gather my friends and we'll stop the war. Then, I'll help you, too."

To say Satella was surprised would be an understatement. When she made an effort to encourage him to save and help others, she did not think that it would run this far, especially for someone like her. Though, perhaps that was foolish of her to think. This was Subaru, after all.

However, that didn't stop her from holding her own doubts. She knew that the inevitable was coming. If things weren't resolved in time, it was very probable that she would cause harm to innocent people once again. Before, in the past, it was a product of her own emotion; but, now, it would be completely uncontrollable.

In the end, relented and decided to hold some faith in Subaru. While current events were grim, that shouldn't stop her from trying to believe him. He had grown a lot, both in kind and as a person. Now, he even seemed to have regained some of his wisdom from the Seal back, too. She fully trusted him.

Even so, if things took a complete turn for the worse, Satella was sure that Subaru would do what needed to be done. If he wouldn't use the Sealing spell within the book, there would be... other methods in which he could deal with her. One of which, she was sure, would end up in his hands soon enough.

A sudden light began to envelop them both, signifying Subaru's exit from the void within himself, he parted his lips to speak one final time.

"I'll say what I told you before." He was full of the same will and determination she'd seen back at the Tea Party all that time ago. Whilst locking eyes with her, he renewed his promise, "I will save you."

When Subaru opened his eyes again, he found himself looking up at a crossing of roofs he didn't recognize. He groaned, sitting himself up with a lot less resistance than he thought. He sat himself on his butt, taking a moment to evaluate his condition.

Nothing hurt, nothing stung, nothing was sore... he felt good. It was almost weird, in a way, considering how he was supposedly catatonic not too long ago.

Subconsciously, he reached up to touch his neck. To his surprise, there was no evidence of a wound having ever been inflicted. In fact, it seemed as though there wasn't any trace of a scar, either.

He let out a huffed laugh, somewhat amused at the bizarreness of his situation. He truthfully almost couldn't believe it.

The body next to him soon caught his eye. Her lifeless, cyan eyes endlessly stared at him. The blood which spewed from her lips and the wound in her chest was now dried, having permanently stained her clothes.

Subaru's eyes softened as he fought the urge to turn away. He took a deep breath through his mouth, using his hands and knees to slowly make his way closer to her. Once he was finally close enough, he steadied himself on the ground and rose a single hand to her face.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low, quiet tone. His hand reached her eyes, his fingers gently pushing down on her lids to close them. "I'll make sure your last wish is granted. I'll save them, I promise. You... You can rest now, Petra."

He took one final deep breath as he slowly removed his hand, bringing it back to his side. A single tear moved down his cheek, only to be quickly wiped away with a sweep of his arm.

Subaru then stood, only to freeze. The sight of another body, one that shouldn't even be there, grabbed his attention.

Louis lay collapsed on the ground, a hole through her stomach, dead. His breath hitched, becoming more uneasy as he saw the remains of her intestines splattered across the ground. The momentary shock of the sight made his mind draw a blank.

Then, he heard faint screaming coming from somewhere in the distance. More screaming followed, indicating that more than just one person was in danger. He could smell the stench of smoke as it flowed into the air.

Overpowering all of that was a smell he'd long since grown accustomed to: the smell of blood. However, in this case, he didn't know if it was from Louis or from the many people that were likely just beyond the alleyway.

He looked toward the alleyway's exit, eyes widening and lips slightly parted in a show of shock. The light missed his face, concealing his expression in the darkness. As his mind quickly began to comprehend what was happening, he could only think to utter one, simple line.

"Dora, what have you done..."

***Chapter 13*: Vainglorious Resolution**

Everything has a meaning.

Chapter 13: Vainglorious Resolution

"Dora, what have you done..."

He did his best to catch his breaths, trying to wear out the shock of the situation. Eventually, he was able to stabilize himself, though it was harder than he thought it would be. He put a hand over his heart, closing his eyes as he continued to take steady, deep breaths.

When he opened his eyes again, he began to gather his thoughts with a clearer mind. As he had learned from Satella, he couldn't let his emotions cloud his judgment. If that were to happen, the decisions that he'd make would be unwise and detrimental to what he was trying to accomplish.

Right now, he needed to use the wisdom that he'd gained during his eternal imprisonment. He needed to approach the situation at a wide, open angle, considering everything before he acted. If he kept to his shallow, narrowed view, he would not succeed.

An object on the ground seemed to glow, which brought him out of his thoughts for a moment. He angled his head downward in order to get a better look at it, his eyes widening upon realizing what it was.

He took a few steps forward, approaching the object with a bit of caution. Once he stood above it, he kneeled down and extended a hand to grab it. It slid effortlessly into his grasp, though it felt abnormally... heavy.

A thin stone tablet now rested in his palm. The symbol in its center glowed brightly, signifying its currently active status. From what Satella told him before, he had a good idea of who was trapped inside.

"Beako, Emilia..."

Yet two more people he had failed to save due to his own idiocy and foolishness. Or, perhaps a simple failure was too low; did he doom them, instead?

His eyes softened, his grip momentarily tightening before loosening itself again. He couldn't help but wonder if it had also felt this heavy for Beatrice during the ten long years that she had carried it around for.

When he gently placed it in his pocket, it felt no different. In a way, he thought of it as a weight which would always press down upon him. A reminder, of sorts.

His eyes glanced over at Louis again, a sense of sadness once again washing over him, as he mourned her.

Of course, he held back a lot of his innate feelings on the matter. Louis was practically his adopted daughter, so seeing her so lifeless pained him to no end. Still, Subaru realized that there would be time to fully grieve more later. He recognized that he couldn't let himself become consumed by his depression nor his anger.

He took additional deep breaths. He let his mind settle, slowly coming to terms with accepting what had been done.

"I'm sorry, Louis," he uttered an apology. He never moved his eyes away from her as he spoke, not wanting to show any kind of disrespect to her death. He wanted to face

her, in a way, and show that he truly meant the words he said. "This was my fault, and I'm sorry. I promise you, I'll make things right."

He would find a way. He would.

But someone else needed him first.

"Dora..."

He uttered her name with a deep sense of longing. He wanted nothing more than to once again have her by his side and hold her hand. Considering what he had done to her, it was selfish of him, greedy even. But he couldn't help but desire it.

A sudden thought occurred to him, prompting him to look down at his hands. He examined his palms, surprised at the fact that he hadn't felt that overwhelming panic yet. The sense of dread and desire to die, which would surface only when he was separated from Pandora, was mostly absent.

He still felt jittery, though. He could feel occasional chills run through his body as his stomach consistently churned in uneasiness. Worry and fear were some of the more prominent emotions, his anxiety, mainly for Pandora herself, taking a forefront in his mind.

While the more severe symptoms of their separation were gone, some aspects of it remained.

He could only begin to wonder why. Perhaps it was due to their extended separation, or maybe his Authority of Lust nullified its effects from healing him? Whatever the case, it hardly mattered to him at that moment.

What really concerned him was Pandora herself. He left her when she needed him most. He failed her, and he knew it. Because of that, she fell back into the darkness she worked so hard to climb out of. She devolved into the ruthless, emotionless monster that she used to be.

He couldn't let that persist — not again.

It was up to him to shine the light back into her voided heart. Though, whether he could do it alone, he didn't know for sure. He broke their promise and essentially betrayed the trust that she had placed in him; he wouldn't be surprised if she were to deny any approach from him. In all aspects, she may not even want to forgive him.

Before his thoughts could delve any deeper into the problem at hand, he felt something strange. It was an odd pull or sensation that drew at both his body and mind, one which urged him to gradually move closer to a particular place in the alleyway.

He turned his head, choosing to first see what was calling to him in such a way. When he laid eyes on it, he found himself once again surprised at the sight. There on the ground lay a familiar black box, one which was only used a mere day earlier.

He reacted rather quickly, walking over to it and crouching down to pick it up. His movements weren't dissimilar to how he'd first grasped the Seal of Eternity.

He held it firmly in his hand, the abnormal sensations and feelings repeatedly calling out to him even more so than before. It felt different than the whispers of his Authority of Lust or the tingle of his Authority of Wrath. This was... unique.

Still, he knew full well what was contained within. The Witch Factor of Vainglory, or at least half of it, was what called to him. It pulled at him, ushering his will to open the box. It was so very tempting, almost in an intoxicating sense.

Despite its undesirable nature, Subaru could see the potential in its benefits. In fact, he could feel his own hope for the looming situation rising. He could *use* this to help everyone. This could be the key to helping him fix everything.

His eyes narrowed at the box, contemplating his final thoughts. While it was true that the Authority would be a great asset to him, he was unsure as to whether it was a good idea to actually attempt wielding it. From how it interacted with him now, and how it has interacted with Pandora over the course of a few centuries, it seemed malicious and destructive.

But, the better half of his mind urged him to try. He knew that, without it, his success would wager little to none. With it, he could *help* people. He could help Pandora; he could help them all.

So, with one deep breath, he used his other hand to grip the top of the box. Then, in one swift motion, he opened it.

The after effects were immediate. He could feel the Witch Factor almost lunge at him, ramming into him and intertwining with his very soul. Something from within beckoned him, and he couldn't help but close his eyes and follow.

When Subaru opened his eyes, he found himself standing back in the black void once more. At this point, it didn't surprise him at all. Considering the amount of times he'd already been in these places, Subaru was, unfortunately, becoming very accustomed to it.

But that hardly mattered. Subaru's expression dawned one of seriousness, his breath steadied and posture guarded. His eyes narrowed ahead of him, entirely focused on the figure standing accords from him.

Illuminated in his vision stood the girl he loved, dressed in nothing but a single cloth which covered her torso. It rested loosely around one of her shoulders, as did the edges around her legs. On her face existed a small, unnatural smile.

She looked no different than the day they first met.

But... that was what unsettled Subaru the most.

He was cautious, his body stiff and guarded as he carefully observed her. She was unmoving, only continuing to blankly smile at him. It was unnerving, and he hated it.

Preparing himself, Subaru parted his lips and asked the fated question, "Are you... Are you her?"

He could see as her eyes narrowed, though they still seemed almost dazed and blank. She hummed in a thoughtful manner, "Am I her? Am I whom?"

Subaru blinked at her once before proceeding to profusely shake his head. He hardened his gaze, now unwavering in his stance as he spoke, "You know exactly what I'm asking."

"Do I?"

In a split second, she disappeared from in front of him and reappeared directly behind him. Her words tickled against his ear, sending a cold chill down his spine and making him jump back in shock.

He straightened himself quickly, still giving the girl in front of him a hard look. She seemed moderately amused by this, but any more complex emotion was hidden.

She took a step forward, followed quickly by another. Her posture never wavered, but Subaru's stiffened as he readied himself in response to her advance. The smile ceased to fade, nor did the static expression on her face. Her steps angled toward the side, almost as if she were circling him, but she still moved closer and closer.

"You believe that you can see through me," she spoke, her words as psychological as they were chilling. "But can you see through yourself?"

Something wasn't right.

His head tingled and screamed at him to move, to attack first and defend himself against something that had yet to come. He acted on that feeling, his instincts guiding his movements. He immediately formed his left hand into a fist, extending his arm in an attempt to hit her.

Pandora merely raised her right arm, batting his attack away without sparing a glance, before quickly thrusting the palm of her right hand straight into his chest.

Subaru flew backward, feeling the intense pressure and shockwave of the hit. His back smashed into something, the sound of what seemed like glass shattering exploding in his ears.

As he was launched backward the fragments of glass became apparent in his vision. Not only that, but he was no longer just in the dark void, but starting to fall through the glass barrier and into an entirely new plain.

He was high above the ground, his feet just barely saving him from falling over the edge. He could feel an intense gust of wind hit his face, almost helping to make him fall to his doom. He acted quickly, extending one of his Helping Hands outward, grabbing hold of Pandora's torso and halting his momentum.

He tried to pull himself back in, but Pandora acted faster. She grabbed hold of his Helping Hand using both of her hands, spinning her body around and taking Subaru with her. He flew out of the previous space, having been swung back into the black void before being thrown into yet another glass barrier.

Subaru crashed into some kind of wall only to fall onto something else. It was strangely soft and comfortable, almost welcoming in a way his body longed for. When he picked up his head, he only had only a moment to notice that he was back in his old room in Japan once more.

A second later, Pandora stepped through the barrier. Subaru had no time to react, unable to dodge as she raised her hand and delivered a hard backhand to his cheek. His head flung downward, crashing into the backboard of his bed with a thud.

She now stood over him, lowering herself down and using both of her hands to reposition him and grab him by the throat. She started to choke the life out of him, his breaths turning into labored gasps.

He reacted quickly this time, pressing his feet to her stomach and using his arms to extend two Helping Hands onto the ceiling. He used them to lift both Pandora and himself off of the ground, alleviating the pressure on his neck and making her let go.

He used his legs to flip them both whilst in the air, recalling the two Helping Hands before once again extending them out to the floor. Once they made contact he immediately used their foundation to thrust himself downward with immense force, his feet digging into her stomach as they crashed through the bed and floor landing them in the next room below.

He bent down, barely even registering the familiarity of his old living room, and used his right fist to strike her cheek in hopes of knocking her out. Her head recoiled, but it merely bounced back not even a moment later.

Subaru tried to get away, but Pandora moved faster. She grabbed his ankle, the intensity of her grip threatening to pierce through his flesh as she pulled him back.

She lifted herself off of the ground, as she yanked him, the force of her pull sending him falling face first into the floor before being carelessly tossed into another wall. His back roughly bounced off it before he fell to the ground, struggling to breathe as he got the wind knocked out of him.

He could do little to prevent her from approaching, unable to defend against her knee which thrust itself straight into his jaw. His head recoiled back, only narrowly missing the wall by an inch.

She bent down, grabbing his throat with her left hand before proceeding to roughly yank him into the air. She held him above her own head, her grip on his neck threatening to squeeze the life out of him with every second that passed.

A sense of dread swelled inside of him, as he looked down at her. Her expression had never shifted, having consistently kept the same cold, emotionless smile the entire time. He found himself horrified at that realization.

Then, she reeled her arm back and threw him to the side. He flew through the air, crashing into yet another wall and breaking through it. His momentum only ceased when his backside hit something else, letting his body fall to the ground with a hard thump.

Subaru coughed, trying to catch his breath, as he tried to pick himself up from the ground. He was only barely able to do so, feeling his body scream and ache as he tried to move. Luckily, he could just barely feel his Authority of Lust working its magic.

He limped forward, leaning his arm against the wall for support as he gradually moved forward. His eyes lightly looked around, registering many doors and windows lined up in the long hallway that he now resided in. He was back in his school.

He had no time to dwell on it. Pandora tore her own hole through the wall, menacingly entering the hallway and making every light within flicker as a result.

He turned his head back, watching as she turned toward him and began approaching with eerily consistent steps. The lights flickered more and more with the closer she got, with Subaru only doing his best to keep moving toward.

He suddenly turned his entire body around, using his arm to launch himself off of the wall and into the center of the hallway. His stance wavered and his breaths were staggered, but he did his best to stand tall as he stared his aggressor down.

He parted with a staggered breath, his defiance clear on his face as he spoke, "I know this isn't real."

Despite being in these rooms and *feeling* these things, he still knew that he was being held within the constraints of his own mind. He knew that the manifestation of Pandora in front of him now was not the real one.

He would make sure she knew that, too, "And I know this isn't you."

"Do you, though?"

She stopped walking toward him, raising both of her arms and quickly thrusting them out to both of her sides. The hallway around him exploded outward, disappearing into an all too familiar void of darkness.

His eyes moved to look back onto her, but she was gone. He didn't move, instead choosing to focus on controlling his breaths. He did his best to steady himself with the mere seconds that he had.

Fighting her would get him nowhere, and he didn't want to, either. Despite this entity being fake, a manifestation of the Witch of Vainglory, it felt... wrong. It felt so wrong to strike the person he loved, even if the one before him wasn't truly her.

If he did try to continue fighting, he was sure that it would amount to nothing. From what just transpired moments ago, it was clear that nothing would phase her. She could counter his moves and shrug off hits as though they were inflicted by a cloud.

He had to get through to her. Just like with Regulus, there had to be a way of getting her to stop. Subaru knew that this was some sort of purification challenge from the Witch Factor, but what was the lesson? If he could figure it out, there was a way.

But what was it trying to make him understand?

"You know me not."

Her voice suddenly seemed to echo from all around him with no clear indication of where it was coming from. It didn't fail to give him chills, but he kept his mind focused.

"I could be this."

Her voice came from behind him, prompting him to turn around. He could immediately notice the difference in her appearance, looking like Pandora but shorter and more teenage-like compared to the one that he knew.

"Or, perhaps this?"

Upon hearing a more high pitched tone come from behind him again, he turned around once more. This time, he was met with the form of a child.

She possessed most of Pandora's core features, the most notable one being her platinum hair. She wore common clothing and her height seemed similar to Meili's by comparison — or, at least Meili's height from ten years ago.

What unsettled him the most was that the child's expression was cold and conniving, both things the face a child should never contain.

"Or this?"

Hearing a rather sultry and seductive tone come from his right, he pivoted to face it. There stood a pale woman with golden blonde hair, her clothing taken straight out of what seemed to be Greek mythology. He was taken aback, stunned by the out of place appearance and expression on her face.

"Or this?"

Behind him again, another voice sounded. He saw another form, this one just as different as the last. She possessed brown hair, brown eyes, and common clothes and accessories.

"Or this?"

Again, he turned to see another.

"Or this?"

Another one.

"Or this?"

And another.

"Or this?"

They kept coming, surrounding him on all sides. He became overwhelmed, unsure of where to look as his head bounced between them all. Every single one smiled at him in the same chilling, unnerving way, only further fueling his stress.

"Tell me, who do you believe I am?"

Her voice once again echoed from all around him, further adding to his disorientation. He tried his best to focus on one of them, but he always found himself dragging his eyes to another, then to the one next to it, and then on.

"I... You're..." he tried to speak, but he couldn't. He tripped on his own words, struggling to communicate the sentence he so desperately wished to say.

Then, they all jumped at him. They tackled him, hit him, pummeled him and made him fall. They kept hitting him over and over again, with Subaru only able to meagerly cover himself in defense.

As they whaled on him, some giggling and laughing all the while, Subaru struggled to catch his breath. His mind threatened to go blank, losing itself with every hit he received. He could feel himself growing more and more frustrated until... he let it out.

With all of his strength, he lifted himself to stand on his feet as Five Helping Hands protruded from his waist. They mimicked the sides of a pentagon and pushed all of the attacking forms away, creating a small shockwave as a result of the force used.

They all faded into the shadows, leaving Subaru alone once again while his Helping Hands came back to him. He tried to catch his breath, ever so slightly beginning to raise his head.

"You do not even know yourself."

What met his eyes was the form of himself, reflected back at him through the glass of a broken mirror. His image was distorted, broken along with the pieces of glass it laid within.

His gaze softened, a hand subconsciously reaching itself out to touch it. He searched within himself, trying to find the answers that he sought. The more he looked for those answers, the more his hand hesitated.

It still inched forward, slowly reaching out further and further until it finally made contact with the mirror. His reflection's face immediately turned devilish, springing forward and straight toward him.

Subaru's eyes widened, but he had no time to react as a figure blasted out of the mirror and straight into him. He flew backward, landing back on the ground not too long after.

With a shaky breath, he found the will to pick himself up. Subaru rose to his knee, raising his head once again only for his expression to turn into one of shock.

Around him lay dozens of dead bodies. The ones closest to him resembled his friends, resting upon the broken rocks and terrain of the land as their final resting place. Emilia, Beatrice, Petra, Louis, Meili, and so many more could only stare lifelessly ahead.

Even as he rose to his feet, he could only continue to petrifyingly stare at the carnage that laid before him. When he finally found the will to move, his eyes ended up looking straight at the main attraction.

A cliff loomed over him, but that was not what horrified him. Plastered and hung on its side was Pandora herself, her entire body riddled with nails to keep her held in place. Her skin was heavily burned, signifying that she was set aflame. Her eye sockets were pure red, stained of the same color trailing down her cheeks as if she'd cried blood.

A massive pit formed in his stomach. He wanted to throw up but greatly resisted it. He couldn't bear to look at the sight any longer, shifting his head down to the side, as he did his best to once again focus on his breaths.

"You do not even know *who you are*."

Something crashed down behind him, his Authority of Wrath's Danger Sense immediately picking up on the danger. He quickly turned around, catching a figure wearing a red cloak in his vision as they extended their right arm.

Subaru immediately acted on his instincts as the figure blasted a red beam from their palm with an audible hum. He quickly ducked down, performing a rollback until his

hands could reliably touch the ground. He extended his arms out, using his hands to lift his body upward and protrude two Helping Hands from his palms to launch him into the air.

The figure retracted their right arm, extending their left and firing another blast at Subaru which narrowly missed. Subaru flipped backward, recalling his Hands and landing on an exposed piece of rubble while the figure flew into the air.

The figure flew to his left, firing another red beam just as Subaru leapt from the ground. He extended Helping Hands from his feet to give him more height, flipping over to another piece of rubble as the enemy's beam missed.

The figure spun once in the air as they flew closer, repositioning their stance and aim, as Subaru readied himself to jump to the side. He once again barely leapt from the ground before the figure fired an additional two beams, one from each palm, in his direction.

Both beams hit the ground, picking up dirt as they swept to the side and just over Subaru's head. Subaru rolled on the ground, bringing himself to a knee and looking up at the figure which loomed overhead.

They righted their stance, raising themselves slightly higher into the air and raising both palms to the side as red energy radiated from their centers. Subaru saw an opening and took it, extending both of his arms outward and letting two Helping Hands extend out with as much force as he could muster.

It was at that moment that Subaru finally got a good look at the raven-black hair and nasty eyes on the figure's face. When he looked at this individual, he saw himself. Many emotions conflicted within him, but he had little time to dwell on those feelings.

As his Sage-like doppelgänger's palms raised overhead, his Helping Hands phased through him as if he weren't even there. They struck the cliff behind him, the force of the attack doing enough damage to cause it to collapse.

Subaru could only look ahead with shock, having been forced to hop to the side in order to avoid a flying chunk of rock. However, his focus had been taken off of the doppelgänger for only a moment, allowing it to get behind him and fire another red blast.

Subaru reacted with his Danger Sense, jumping back to dodge. The figure shot more beams, forcing Subaru to continue jumping back to avoid them until he lost his footing on a loose piece of rubble.

He fell to the ground, only able to look up and watch as his impending doom fell toward him. He raised an arm in a futile attempt to protect himself, the sight of Pandora's body crashing into him being the last thing that he saw.

But, to his surprise, instead of being crushed by the falling rocks, he felt nothing. When he hesitantly opened his eyes, he saw only darkness once more. He could once again hear his own, staggered breathing and feel his uneven heart rate.

Along with his heart, his mind raced. He used the momentary freedom to think everything over, again and again, as many times as he needed to. The events which had just transpired had taken a toll on him, both mentally and physically, all to send him a message that he needed to understand.

Though, despite his erratic state of mind, Subaru was not dissuaded. His recent encounter with Satella had taught him a lot, and he had her to thank for the clear understanding of this painful lesson.

He breathed out two simple, yet very meaningful, words, "I understand."

As if he'd just snapped his fingers, she appeared before him once again. He remained bent down on one knee and raised his head to face her. Pandora's eyes looked down at him, the blank stare that she previously had having been replaced with something more critical and calculating.

Subaru stood to his feet, huffing out a puff of air as he did so. He kept his eyes on her, his face hardened into a serious expression as he parted his lips to repeat his words, "I understand."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment before widening. Subaru recognized the expression as one of surprise, and he wasn't ignorant as to why she was feeling that way.

"You're trying to change yourself right now, aren't you?" Subaru guessed, his expression softening as he spoke those words.

"Why... Why will this not work?" she uttered. Subaru could actually see her try to put more focus into her abilities, but it wouldn't work. At most, her body would momentarily glitch, as would the immediate area in her vicinity, but nothing more would happen.

"Because I see through that," he answered. "I don't see you for what's on the outside."

He picked up a foot and took a step; then another. Slowly and carefully, he made his way over to her. She could only stand there and watch as he approached, all until he eventually stopped right in front of her.

He raised a hand, extending his index finger before using it to lightly tap her chest. "I see you for who you really are, in here," he said in a soft voice. A second later, he smiled, "I spent millions of years with you. You vented to me and told me things I would've never come to know otherwise. I think I know you pretty well."

"You do not know me," she denied, pushing his hand away from her chest. Subaru didn't fight it, letting his arm fall back to his side.

Still, his expression didn't change. He looked at her, confident in his deduction, and began to relay his understanding to her once again, "I do. You hide behind other appearances because it's like a mask. You don't want anyone to see what's behind it."

She stayed silent, only continuing to look at him. Her gaze hardened, but she didn't move. Subaru took a breath, taking a moment to gather his next words.

"That's how it was for me, too," he admitted, lowering his head so that he could look at his hands. "I put up a façade. One that would make people think I was happier than I really was, all because I didn't want them to worry."

He let out a deep sigh, closing his eyes and enclosing his hand to make a fist. He didn't squeeze very tightly, but he acted as though he held something very important within his palm. But, after a moment, he let it go and opened his eyes once more.

His gaze was soft and remorseful, as were his words, "I think, in the end, it hurt them more than I thought it did." He paused, taking a second to raise his head and look Pandora in the eyes. "I regret not opening up to them, now. I missed my chance then, but I'll be damned if I ever let that happen again."

Pandora looked back into his eyes, judging him with every word he spoke. From looking at his eyes, it seemed as though Subaru would shed tears at any given moment. He slowly reached out his hand, gently cupping it around her cheek.

"I don't want to waste that opportunity with you, and I don't want you to waste that opportunity with me," he uttered softly. With a light shake of his head, he continued, "I'm not the same person I was back then, not even ten years ago. The same goes for you, too." With a small smile, he removed his hand from her cheek, "And, now, I know who I am."

At that last line, Pandora's gaze finally seemed to soften. It was as though she was expecting to hear it and similarly expected what was about to come next.

Subaru jabbed a thumb into his chest, an unwavering and confident smile gracing his face, as he assumed his signature pose. "I'm Natsuki Subaru! I'm proud of the friends and family I have, and, while I may not be a hero, I'll still try my best to help everyone I can!"

Pandora remained unchanging for what seemed like minutes. Even after Subaru relinquished his pose, she had yet to alter her expression. Though, when she looked into Subaru's unwaveringly determined eyes, she finally cracked a smile.

Her eyes slowly began to close, gently shutting with a touch of grace. A golden light seemed to envelope her, covering and flowing in streams throughout her entire body. He mesmerizingly watched as she changed, most notably seeing her outfit change into her most recent one.

When the golden light died down, he saw a small smile on her face. This one was unlike the others, holding a sense of happiness, sweetness and care to it. Her outfit changed into the one-piece she'd gotten herself in the Capital, one true testament to signify her change.

She let out a breath, her smile beginning to fade as she looked at him with remorse, "I am sorry. For hurting you."

Subaru did nothing but continue smiling at her, "It's okay, there's nothing to be sorry for."

At his rebuttal, she lightly shook her head in disappointment, but her smile couldn't help resurfacing, "You never cease to amaze me."

"I better not. That's a part of my charm, you know," he joked, causing her to let out a small laugh. After a long moment, his smile faded and his expression adopted one of seriousness. "I'm proud to have been the first person you let down your mask for. I'll make sure you really know that, too."

She watched him with a similarly serious gaze, yet her expression contained a bit of lightheartedness as she responded, "You better. You have a lot to make up because of what you pulled."

He nodded in both understanding and acceptance, "I know. I promise to set things right."

She only nodded in response, satisfied with his statement. "You have truly realized who you are, and the meaning behind such," she said, looking at him with a small, proud smile. "Thus, the Witch Factor of Vainglory is now yours to command."

He smiled back, "Thanks, Dora."

She nodded again, her smile lasting for a few moments before slowly beginning to fade. Suddenly, she reached out and grabbed hold of one of his arms, looking into his eyes all the while.

"I know that I am not real, but..." she paused, her words momentarily trailing off. "Bring the real me back. Please."

Subaru almost froze at hearing how soft her voice was, yet he looked at her with earnest intent. She was practically begging him to save her, something which threatened to tear his heart to shreds. Yet, nevertheless, he looked at her with a firm and determined conviction.

Unlike last time, he would not fail to keep this vow. "I will, I promise."

She looked up at him, parting her lips with one final address, "Thank you."

Then, a blinding white light enveloped his vision.

The next thing he knew, he was back in the alleyway. He took a sharp breath, taking a moment to become cognizant of his return to reality. It took him another moment to realize that he was lying on his back, promptly sitting himself up.

He shot to his feet momentarily after, his heart and mind both racing. As he looked into the light of the alleyway's entrance, he knew that he had no time to lose. He had a promise that he needed to fulfill, so he would pursue it with all of his being.

He dashed forward, only taking a mere few seconds to breach the light. He immediately found himself hit by something, his body moving back as a result of the impact. He looked back to see what had hit him: the sight of a terrified civilian meeting his eyes.

The civilian — a young woman — fell to the ground as a result of bumping into him. The petrified look on her face was haunting in its own right. Before Subaru could even begin to try helping her up, the young woman ferociously backed away before scrambling to her feet and running away as fast she could.

Subaru watched her go in stunned silence. He let out a breath, continuing to pay no mind to the many people running past him. He raised his head, looking up at the sky. Various streams of smoke trailed into the air, signifying the presence of multiple fires.

He turned around, keeping his head pointed up, and followed the trails of smoke back to their sources. Given the fact that everyone was running in one particular direction and that the smoke was coming from the same way, it was easy to tell where Pandora had gone. By following the path laid out to him, he would find her.

Upon closer examination, they all lead straight to the center of the Capital. Subaru sucked in a bunch of air, holding it in for a few seconds before letting it out. While he knew those breathing exercises were becoming repetitive, they really helped him keep a level head in stressful situations such as this.

However, it was all for naught when he finally lowered his head. Subaru almost vomited on the spot, his eyes cursed with the sight of a corpse only a few feet away from him.

Then, his eyes moved to the side, seeing another. After that, another.

The more his eyes moved, the more bodies he saw. Some were even kicked around, their blood looking to have been dragged across the ground. It was then that Subaru realized that, during all of this, the people had been trampling over these bodies as they fled.

Some bodies were missing limbs, organs, and even heads. Not even children were spared. Subaru had to repeatedly remind himself that the Pandora he loved and the Pandora that did this were different. His recent encounter with her manifestation as Vainglory helped solidify this in his mind.

He closed his eyes and took another few breaths, doing his best to ease both his mind and accelerating heart. He found it difficult at first, but as he assured himself of his goal Subaru found it becoming increasingly easier.

With that done, he opened his eyes and moved forward, determination lacing his gaze. If one were to take the time to pay attention to him, they would have found his movement to be weird. After all, why would someone run toward the danger instead of away?

For Subaru, the answer was obvious. He had a mission, a promise to fulfill. He would reply that fact in his head thousands of times over if he had to.

He ran through the city streets, turning through various sudden corners in an attempt to properly navigate himself to the right area. Despite having a trail to follow in the sky, finding a good path on the ground was anything but easy.

During this, he did his best to distract himself from the sights. Nothing was pretty, to say the least. Everywhere he went, there was more carnage and destruction. He had to try and ignore it, lest the guilt of his fault eat him alive.

As he ran, a scream registered in his ears. He quickly turned to the source, watching as the last of a small building collapsed to the ground. He held up his arms to shield his eyes from the blowing dirt and dust as the building settled.

The scream that he had heard before rang out again. Subaru rushed toward the fallen structure in a hurry, immediately tracing the scream to be coming from somewhere under the rubble. He used his Authority of Sloth to help lift as many pieces as possible, soon finding the source that he was looking for.

Under the rubble lay a woman with her entire lower body pinned under a large pillar. She continuously screamed, flailing around in panic. Subaru had no doubt that this woman thought that she was going to die.

He rushed forward, running straight into the pillar and doing his best to try lifting it into the air. Only then did the woman notice him, her screams momentarily ceasing as she looked at him with wide eyes.

The pillar was much too heavy for him to lift alone. The poor woman almost screamed again when Subaru used his five Helping Hands to grab hold of the broken structure, all of their might being funneled to lift it.

Then, with a lot of effort, it rose. The pillar was forced into the air, just enough so that Subaru was able to use one of his Hands to pull her out of the way. Once she was clear he let go of the pillar, letting it crash to the ground with a heavy thump.

He coughed, having inhaled more dust and dirt as a result of the pillar's crash. The woman's gasps of pain, however, let him refocus his mind. He quickly went over to her, kneeling down and placing a hand on her stomach.

"Please, try not to move," he said, closing his eyes and focusing his mind solely on the individual in front of him. He let the whispers in his ear guide him once again, images of the woman's body and condition flooding his mind.

She was physically broken. Her legs were completely shattered, having been crushed under the intense weight of the pillar. At the same time, he could sense the distress in her mind; he could feel the panic and pain she currently suffered with.

His Authority of Lust, Natural State, worked its magic. Her body began to heal, slowly restoring it to how it was naturally supposed to be. Any trace of even a small cut was gone in just under a minute. At the same time, he could feel the distress in her mind subtly begin to ease.

When it was done, Subaru retracted his arm, opened his eyes, and took heavy breaths. The act took a good amount of energy out of him, but he didn't feel the effects as devastatingly as before. He felt as though he could still move and run, which was all that mattered.

"You... You're him."

Subaru lifted his head, meeting the eyes of the woman whom he'd just saved. She looked at him in awe, her face conveying the sheer amount of shock she now felt.

"You're him!" she suddenly exclaimed, her expression turning into one of happiness and hope, much to Subaru's surprise. "You're the hero! You'll save us!"

Now Subaru was the one that was shocked. He had essentially frozen in place, lost in what to say or do in response to such a declaration.

Then, he was thrown back even more, both literally and figuratively, when she shot up and hugged him. "Thank you for saving me," she whispered gratefully into his ear, surprising him even more.

"Mama! Mama!"

The calls of a crying, high pitched voice made itself known amongst the chaos. It seemed to trigger something within the woman, who made sure to immediately back away and stand up. Subaru watched as she turned away, running directly toward the source of the call.

There, just beyond the rubble, was a crying little boy. When he caught sight of the woman, he almost teared up even more. The boy ran toward the woman whilst balling his eyes out, but the woman didn't mind, as she scooped him up into her arms.

She held him with care, rubbing his back and whispering kind things into his ear in order to calm him down. After a moment, a man ran over and embraced the woman. Subaru noticed that, as the woman embraced him back, the man too was crying.

After that, the family ran away in hopes of finding safety. Subaru could only watch them go, his mind circulating through various different thoughts all at once.

He lost what could have been...

... but can still save what can be.

He shook his head, quickly snapping out of his stupor. He adopted a determined gaze, ready to save what he had so carelessly lost.

But then, his thoughts were immediately interrupted by someone grabbing hold of his shoulders. He stiffened almost immediately, moving away defensively and turning around to confront whomever touched him.

In front of him looked to be a man of nobility, given his clothes. His features were nothing too notable, though he did look to have an odd looking mustache. The man fixed him with a rather happy smile, parting his lips and moving his body excitedly, "Ah! It is you, the hero! That woman's yell was not as preposterous after all!"

Subaru shook his head as if he were trying to shake his confusion away. What was with everyone calling him a hero all of a sudden? He wasn't a hero; he didn't want to be one.

He looked at the man with a questioning look but also one that signified his hurry, "I... I don't know what you're talking about, but I really need to-"

"Allow me to introduce myself," the man interrupted, blocking Subaru's path from leaving. Subaru lightly grit his teeth in annoyance, but didn't force the man out of his way. He didn't want to hurt a civilian, even if he was in a rush. The man continued, "I am Count Reedback, and I have a proposal for you."

The man's eccentricities aside, Subaru narrowed his eyes with caution. "What kind of proposal?" he asked, choosing to tread through this interaction carefully.

"You see, I am a bit of a collector. I have a particular taste of rarities and artifacts." The man known as Count Reedback turned his head to the side, almost as if he were watching for anyone eavesdropping. He looked back at Subaru, continuing with his story, "And so, I have something you may be interested in."

The man pulled something out from behind his back, making Subaru act defensively in preparation for a possible attack. However, the man merely held the object out in presentation to him, choosing to lay it across both of his palms.

Count Reedback smiled down at it, speaking his praise all the while, "Zeam here is a beauty. Such a magnificent piece of work."

Subaru was surprised to have seen an entire unsheathed sword in the man's palms. This wasn't just any normal sword either, with its grade and quality being second to none. Its blade, while shorter than most, was intimidating and sharp. The tip was especially pointed, as though it were meant to be smoothly stabbed into something.

The hilt was made out of a fine material, wrapped in a similarly fine fabric. Above the hilt rested a purple gem of some kind, encased by pure gold. The gold extended down on either side of the hilt, its design making it look rather royal.

The gold also extended up into a crossguard-like addition. However, unlike a normally straight crossguard, this one stuck up and curved inward toward the blade before curving outward again. Overall, it almost reminded Subaru of a trident while the entire design, to him, resembled that of a royal crown.

Subaru looked up at the man, an equally cautious and questionable expression on his face as he asked, "Are you... just giving this to me?" The man nodded, much to Subaru's bewilderment. He continued, "Why?"

The man tilted his head once or twice on either side rather quirkily, trying to signify that it was no big deal. "Eh, it's not too much of a problem," he said, looking at Subaru with a peculiar expectancy. "I think this will be much more useful for you in this predicament than hanging around uselessly with me."

The man laughed at his own statement while Subaru fixed him with a gaze laced in suspicion, "You're not going to make me pay for this, are you?"

"Making that wretched Witch pay will be enough for me," the man suddenly spoke in a serious tone, taking Subaru off-guard. He thought it best not to give any sort of reaction or indication to the man's statement, choosing to stay silent until the Count spoke again, "Now, come on, take it."

Subaru looked down as he gestured for him to grab it. He quickly pondered the uses for a sword such as this, finding himself unable to see the fault of carrying one. It was always good to keep a weapon on hand just in case, after all.

Hesitantly, he reached his hand out and grabbed a hold of the hilt. Slowly, he lifted it and brought it closer to him. The man lowered his arms, a smile coming to his face as Subaru held the sword out in front of him.

Surprisingly, it felt lighter than he had anticipated. For a sword, it felt strangely heavy but it also flowed well with his movements and didn't feel like a drag to hold. Overall, the sword itself felt nice in his hand.

When everything in one moment was fine, in the next it all came crashing down upon him.

Subaru's eyes widened as something pulsed within his chest, staggering both his breath and energy. He threatened to collapse on the ground, falling to one knee and unwillingly lowering the sword to his side as he tried to regain his energy.

"Ah! I forgot to mention, the sword holds quite *marvelous* properties," Count Reedback added, beginning to back himself away from Subaru, who was doing his best to catch his breath. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must salvage what remains of my collection. Good luck, hero!"

The man ran off, leaving Subaru to recover on his own. As moments fled by, he could feel something strange stir within both himself and the sword. The pulsating feeling within his chest also existed within the sword. He could feel it; a connection sprouting between both entity and object.

This sword was truly unlike any other. It held almost unimaginable power; power which bonded with and drew on his energy and mana.

Having caught his breath, Subaru raised the sword tip and held it upright in his hand once more. He looked into the purple gem encased at its center, watching as the light glistened off of it in ordinance to the sun in the sky. One side was bright, while the other remained dark.

Subaru knew what this sword could do. He could feel what it was capable of.

The Sword...

... of Life.

***Chapter 14*: Little Lost Souls**

Sorry for the long wait! Writing hasn't been easy for the past while now.

Still, though, I've managed to get this done, along with another chapter, the second part to this one, that you'll probably see later this week, or in exactly a week from now. I'm pretty excited to get these out there and hear your thoughts on them in the reviews/comments! These chapters have been a long time coming, after all.

Without further ado, I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 14: Little Lost Souls

In the midst of a long, drawn-out war, getting a message directly from the Queen had initially been surprising for Reinhard. He'd initially steeled himself, ready and willing to receive any orders that he may be given. Whatever the orders were, he would be sure to carry them out to the fullest extent for his kingdom.

However, to Reinhard's additional surprise, Felt seemed ... happy. She seemed excited, more lively than he'd seen her in so many years. For a moment, Reinhard recognized her as the Felt he used to know.

As if to drill that image into his head, she began to greet and yell at him like she always used to do. Her harsh, yet well-meaning, statements and expressions held more weight than even Felt herself realized.

Something within Reinhard warmed in those moments, a smile even beginning to grace his face.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. His smile fell once she delivered the unexpected, yet fateful, news: "He's back, Rein ... Big Bro is really back!"

After that, Reinhard just stood there. His eyes blankly looked ahead for what felt like many seconds, and he refused to respond even as Felt called out to him through the metia.

Though, contrary to what one might think, this wasn't because he was upset, or even angry. No, instead, Reinhard was overwhelmed with intense shock, disbelief, and even a growing anxiety.

By the time he went to address Felt again, he'd already worried her enough through his silence. The growing sadness and feelings of worthlessness swelled even more in his chest, but he had little time to dwell on them.

Felt had also requested that he retrieve one of the deadliest duos in their army: Garfiel and Meili. Those two alone had more successful operations and kills than entire battalions. Reinhard himself was their only true rival in those aspects, but that was only because of how monstrous he was. However, he wasn't to retrieve them for combat; no, he needed to bring them back to the Capital with him.

Luckily for him, the two weren't currently caught up in any engagements, so he didn't have to go back onto the battlefield to look for them.

Reinhard used his speed to quickly scour the camp, soon coming across Meili as she prepared a meal for herself. Without any warning, Reinhard approached her, easily picked her up, and stuck her under his arm.

"My apologies, Portroute-san," Reinhard quickly said, settling his arm so that she couldn't escape.

"Hey!" she yelled out. "How many times do I have to tell you! Don't call me tha~at!"

"Ah, right. My apologies, Natsuki-san," Reinhard corrected, turning his head toward the exit and immediately rushing off to scour the camp once more.

Surprisingly, she hadn't struggled at all. If anything, she was more upset at the fact that he had accidentally said the wrong name.

After Subaru disappeared, she had taken on his name. She always told everyone that it was to spread his memory, to keep him alive, but everyone that was close to him — was close to *her* — already knew the real reason.

Reinhard, even with all of his Divine Protections, still always struggled with that.

It wasn't because he couldn't remember; no, it was because he didn't want to. Every time he remembered that name, or even thought about it, he would feel the onslaught of his own repressed feelings.

In a way, he was thankful for the war because of that.

Reinhard brought his mind back from those thoughts. Instead, he thought of how easily Meili had submitted to his hold. Instead of struggling and flailing her limbs to try and escape, she just slumped in his grasp and let him carry her. He couldn't help but momentarily wonder why.

Garfiel, on the other hand ...

"Oi! Let go of my amazin' self, Sword Saint!"

"I apologize, Garfiel-san, but I cannot do that."

Unlike Meili, Garfiel thrashed and fought as much as he could, though it proved to be no challenge for Reinhard's grip. Needless to say, Garfiel didn't get very far and eventually gave up, letting Reinhard sprint to the Capital without the minimal disturbances.

If he moved fast enough, he could arrive by the early morning. Of course, he'd ensure that his two passengers were plenty safe and not in any danger of disorientation or injury during the trip.

They would vehemently argue against that, though.

In hindsight, Reinhard considered how he, perhaps, should have told them of what was happening. He probably should have shared the Queen's statement, or at least what her specified orders were.

If he had revealed the truth, he was sure that the two of them would've been just as ecstatic as he was and would've been just as eager to get back to the Capital. Instead, he had said nothing and likely left them in a frustratingly pondering silence.

However, as daylight broke and their approach to the Capital became imminent, Reinhard felt an increasing sense of nervousness swell within him. At first, he believed it to have been a byproduct of his own feelings, perhaps fear or anxiety to see his friend after so long.

He had failed in his duty, after all. Subaru had asked for his company, his protection, and, yet, he had failed to keep him safe. His failure had resulted in Subaru's disappearance and subsequent death.

Well, what Reinhard thought was Subaru's death, anyway.

Though, as he came closer and closer to the Capital, Reinhard realized that his earlier feelings were not his own, but a result of one of his Divine Protections being triggered.

His Divine Protection of Sensory Awareness was making him aware of an approaching danger, subtly warning him and making him feel slightly nervous as a result.

By the time the sun was high enough in the sky, Reinhard could finally see the Capital. It was then that he fully understood.

Seeing the various trails of smoke which rose into the sky made him go just a bit faster, soon passing the Capital's walls and stopping somewhere inside. The screaming, while overbearing, did not overwhelm him. As the Sword Saint – a monster beyond any feasible comprehension – he was used to it.

He dropped his two passengers, who were incredibly disoriented. As the two recovered, Reinhard looked ahead of himself, narrowing his eyes. So many people ran, fleeing for their lives. They would all run right past him, going unnoticed by the terrified crowd.

It wasn't long before he sprung forward again, carefully navigating the streets until he soon came to an abrupt halt. His eyes remained narrowed, his stance on-guard, and a hand pressed against the hilt of his sword.

"Halt. I cannot allow you to proceed," he spoke, his voice commanding and stern. It was something that would have been intimidating to most people.

However, the entity in front of him did not classify as such. Her long, platinum-hair flowed gently in the breeze. Her deep blue eyes stared blankly back at him, with the expression on her face remaining stoic. Around her lay around a dozen bodies, all killed no more brutally than another.

Reinhard's eyes widened, immediately recognizing those features, before once again narrowing into an intense, borderline hateful, glare. He knew exactly who this was.

He could never have forgotten the face he saw that day – *her* face. The same Witch that made him unable to protect his friend. The same Witch who took that friend away; the friend that saw him as Reinhard, as a real person, and not as the Sword Saint.

The hand which laid over the hilt at his side closed itself around it, firmly grabbing hold of the sword which still rested in its sheath. At first, her worthiness to face the Dragon Sword, Reid, surprised him. However, that surprise quickly subsided once he recalled how easily she had cast him aside during their last encounter, along with the destruction which lay before him now.

His hand shook as his grasp around the hilt tightened, internally struggling against himself. As rational thought came back to his mind, his hand opened itself up and let go of the hilt, falling back to his side.

Despite how much he wanted to use it, to completely exterminate her, he couldn't. He had to remember where he was, what was around him, and *who* was around him. There were innocent people everywhere, and one strike from that sword would be enough to kill anyone in its path, not to mention that it could even potentially level the city.

Instead, he reached back with his right hand and unsheathed a more ordinary blade. While not as strong as the sword at his side, this blade would do plenty well at getting rid of the abomination before him.

... How hypocritical of him.

Even as he positioned the blade in front of him, the Witch had not moved. She remained stoic, her eyes unblinking. Right then, he appeared before her, his sword sweeping across from right to left and cutting her in half.

Or so he thought.

She was gone. Her body vanished, momentarily startling and confusing him. He quickly composed himself and quickly began to look around. It didn't take long for him to find her again, hiding behind a stone pillar with her back pressed up against it.

He appeared there in an instant. From where he stood, he diagonally swung his sword with such an unnatural strength that it cut the pillar in two. This time he was able to watch as her body split apart, falling lifelessly to the ground.

He heard footsteps behind him. He turned around, seeing her again. This time she ran, trying to get away. Any form of surprise in him faded quickly. He wouldn't let her get away, appearing directly beside her and using his sword to promptly behead her. He watched as the head hit the ground, rolling a bit as the body slowly collapsed soon thereafter.

Turning his head again, he saw more. There was so many of her, all running around him in the same direction. He shook his head, blinked a few times, trying to refocus his mind. When he looked up again, nothing had changed.

She was trying to fool him; she was trying to cover her escape with pesky illusions.

It wouldn't work.

His grip on the sword tightened, his teeth gritting as he sprung forth. He swung his sword fluently in the air, cutting down each and every clone of the Witch he saw, one by one, with flawless efficiency. He felt no resistance as he sliced through her body, each and every time, and didn't even bother to watch as the bodies hit the ground.

When all was done, he stopped moving, straightening his posture and letting out a relieved breath. The deed had been done. The Witch was finally dead. Now, he could focus on helping the citizens recover and rest easy knowing that he had finally, truly destroyed the enemy which took away his friend.

Except ... he couldn't. Standing there, before him, was the Witch. Her expression was no longer stoic, only holding one noticeable difference: a small, satisfied smile.

A moment of confusion washed over Reinhard in that moment. However, his eyes weighed themselves down, widening as his confusion vanished in an instant.

Around him lay not the bodies of the Witch, but of normal people. The innocent citizens of Lugnica lay dead around him, sliced, beheaded, and even dismembered. Despite his many Divine Protections, and his title of Sword Saint, he found himself trembling under the weight of what he had done.

Scared, innocent people were killed mercilessly by his own hand and sword. He looked at each of their faces, all of them burrowing deep into his memory.

Reinhard — no, *the monster* dropped his bloodied sword onto the ground, falling to his knees. His eyes could only stare blankly ahead, trapped within his own mind and thoughts.

He hadn't even noticed when the Witch left.

He was alone, forced to bear the consequences of what he'd done.

"Reinhard?"

He didn't even know how long he'd been there for. All he could think about was their faces. Each and every one of them.

"Reinhard? Is that you?"

He didn't even acknowledge the voice which called out to him. Its sound and tone was unknown to him, existing only as background noise within his head.

Then, he stiffened. A hand, gentle and caring, rested itself upon his shoulder. The sudden contact was enough to bring him out of the stupor he'd been trapped within. The figure stood behind him, but he still didn't bother to turn around to face them.

"C'mon Reinhard, buddy, talk to me."

Reinhard felt as though something was stuck in his throat, causing him to gulp. Afterward, he parted his lips and audibly exhaled. His mind wandered, unfocused and unsure. No matter what, it always rounded back to what he'd done.

"I ... I killed them," he uttered. He didn't even bother looking back as he spoke.

His eyes only continued to stare ahead, blankly looking upon the bloody massacre he'd made. Even without looking at them, each of their faces were etched into his memory.

To add to the memory, he would never forget the ways he had killed them. With each face existed a correlated method of death. His Divine Protection was "useful" for that.

He truly was a monster.

"And, let me guess, you're sitting here blaming yourself?"

Reinhard couldn't help but momentarily consider the absurdity of the question. He didn't move his head, but his gaze shifted slightly to the side, as if trying to look back.

With a lacking response, the person behind him hummed and positioned himself closer. Their other hand grasped his other shoulder for a moment before moving slightly past his head and pointing down.

Reinhard's eyes followed the finger to look at the body of an adult woman. Or, rather, two halves of an adult woman. He had sliced her in two from just under her shoulders, splitting her body into four separate parts. From what it seemed, she was just a common, ordinary citizen. However, the bump in her belly seemed to suggest that she was about to become something more special than just that.

"Look at her and tell me that you meant to kill her," said the voice, stern and strangely confident. "Tell me that you intentionally looked at this woman and believed that she needed to die."

"I ..." Reinhard uttered, trailing off. The rest of his words were caught in his mouth, leading him to struggle with what to say. His mind was a mess, battling back and forth as to how to answer the voice's inquiry. Eventually, his lips parted to speak once more, "I didn't think that."

The person behind Reinhard let out a rather satisfied "hmpf," moving his hands back and off of his shoulders. Reinhard could hear the sound of the person's footsteps moving beside him, just as he heard them speak again, "Then there you go."

Reinhard let out a hefty breath through his nose, keeping his eyes on the woman below him as he spoke, "But it was still my actions which ended her life. I was responsible for her untimely death, whether I wanted it to happen or not. This is my responsibility to bear."

The person behind him hummed, letting out a heavy breath afterward. He didn't move, standing silently behind him, supposedly musing their own thoughts.

"You know, nobody's perfect," he said. The statement slightly confused Reinhard, making him ponder on its meaning until the individual spoke again. "You're really holding yourself up to a high bar, here. You're trying to meet everybody's standards of you, which isn't healthy, and it's basically killing you from the inside out."

The person's words did little to settle Reinhard's mind, even making him more unsure of their meaning. He parted his lips, hardly speaking, "I'm ... afraid I don't quite understand." He tilted his head slightly down and to the side, as if trying to look at the

individual behind him. "I bear the title of the Sword Saint. I am a Royal Knight of this kingdom. Is it not my duty to meet the expectations given to me?"

Silence ensued for a long moment, only broken by a light sigh from the mysterious individual. "Let me put it this way. You're human. You're not some knight in shining armor — well, I guess you technically are, but it's who's behind the armor that matters. It's like you're letting the armor wear you, instead of you wearing the armor."

Reinhard straightened his head, blinking as he tried his best to process those words. His understanding of them wavered, continuously debating with himself on their meaning.

"Point is," the person began, "you're not a perfect symbol. And, I'm sorry to say, but you never will be. The same goes for everyone else. Holding yourself to that standard is only going to keep hurting you. You're a human, just like the rest of us."

It was then that Reinhard finally understood what this person was trying to say. He was telling him that, despite his title and position, he was not obligated to be some special hero. Put bluntly, this person was suggesting that he was just ... Reinhard.

That was something he hadn't considered, or even heard, in a long, long time.

Despite the revelation, Reinhard still found himself disagreeing. With the evidence laid before him, he looked out and spoke his innermost thoughts, "Does that truly matter? In the light of all I have done, do those facts hold any weight for me?"

"Of course they do," the person responded without missing a beat. "You're human, and you're a good person. We all make mistakes, even the best of us."

"A mistake?" Reinhard's voice droned, nearly scoffing at such a term. His eyes gazed upon the bodies, parting his lips as he continued, "Labeling this as a mere mistake would be a disservice to the lives that are lost."

"But can it be anything else?" the person retorted. "You're not evil; you told me yourself that you didn't intend for this to happen. You didn't look at these people and want them to die."

They paused, taking a moment to catch their breath before finalizing their point.

"You were tricked. You thought that you were fighting someone else — someone much more deserving of this fate," they spoke in a low, almost regretful tone. "This isn't your fault, Reinhard. Instead, the fault lies with the one that tricked you; the one that made you do it."

Reinhard's eyes softened at that. His mind was jumbled, considering those words but holding onto his doubt in a desperate act of denial. "My actions still remain irrefutable. There is still nothing that can be done."

"I ... know what it's like to want to start over; to retry. I know what it's like to lose someone forever. You want them back, but you know that there's no way it can actually happen." The person concluded with a low, solemn voice. They stayed silent for a long moment, seemingly lost in thought, before finally continuing, "But there's always ways to atone for that."

It was then that Reinhard finally garnered the courage to pick himself back up, turning around to face the person behind him. His intention was to further question them, but ... once he saw the person's face, those intentions immediately left his mind.

"S-Subaru."

Standing before him was his old friend, the very same one he had initially returned for. The same friend which he had lost all of those years ago, all due to his subsequent failure. With a half-smile, Subaru raised a hand and parted his lips, "Yo."

Reinhard greatly resisted the urge to hug him. It was mostly the shock and anxiety which held him back, but he did little to restrain his own expression. Reinhard was truthfully unsure as to what face he was actually making, but he knew it did a lot to convey how he truly felt.

With the shock also came doubt, something which repeatedly ate away at his mind for years. It was like an incurable plague, always sticking with him without any hope of leaving, slowly killing him. Because of that, he fumbled his words, but his intended statement remained the same.

"S-Subaru, my friend — no, I am unworthy of being your friend—"

"Let me stop you right there," Subaru interrupted, even holding up a hand for added emphasis. "I don't want to hear those words come out of your mouth again, alright?"

"B-But ... I failed to protect you," Reinhard argued. "You called upon me to aid you in your expedition, and in your time of need I was unable to do my duty. How can you—"

"What did I say before?" Subaru interrupted again. "You're human. You're not a one-note knight; you're Reinhard, the person. You make mistakes, just like the rest of us. Back then, you were just up against someone you knew too little about. You couldn't have prepared for what happened. I could never blame you for that."

Reinhard wanted to fight, to argue those words, but he stayed silent. Subaru looked at him with a meaningful gaze, giving his words time to sink in.

"I never got to finish what I was saying before," Subaru suddenly spoke again. Reinhard's attention was fully on his friend, listening intently to every word. "I know you feel terrible about what happened, and that's not a bad thing. But you shouldn't keep blaming yourself. Instead, you should try to atone."

Upon hearing the same word as before, Reinhard looked at Subaru with an unconfident expression. "What do you mean by 'atone'?"

Keeping a small, yet slightly wavered, smile, Subaru clarified, "I mean that you should make up for what happened. Help people, be there for them. Honor the people that died instead of continuously wallowing in self-pity and depression."

As those words fully registered with Reinhard, he realized that Subaru spoke as if he had personal experience with these feelings. Internally, Reinhard worried for his friend's well-being. He was concerned for his friend's mental health, silently wondering if, perhaps, Subaru had always felt this way.

He was tempted to question his friend about it, but quickly threw away the thought of doing so. Instead, he chose to ponder the words which were spoken to him. Reinhard considered them carefully, repeating them in his head countless times. It wasn't because he didn't understand them, it was because he wanted to believe them.

Reinhard found himself becoming slightly happy. His friend, the same friend who saw him as a real person, was trying to genuinely help him. It was an odd feeling, but it wasn't bad; rather, he liked it. The feeling of being genuinely cared about was thought to have been long lost to him. Of course, it was always there, hidden beneath the shadows of his heart, but it resurfaced.

A part of him believed himself still unworthy to be Subaru's friend. However, Subaru himself said that they were friends, so it would be disrespectful of him to disregard that statement.

That was why Reinhard found himself believing Subaru's words. Reinhard held their meanings close, choosing to reflect on them and change himself. What he was doing was not right of him; it was disrespectful to the ones he wished to honor. He needed to step up and readjust his feelings.

"I ... understand, now," Reinhard said, tilting his head downward. He moved a hand to hold his heart, doing his best to convey his sincerity. "Thank you for everything, my friend."

Subaru softly smiled at those words. "What're friends for, right?"

At that, Reinhard momentarily let himself smile, too.

Though, even with that, Reinhard internally vowed to *never* forget the lives that had been lost. He would remember them, holding them close to his heart and soul, while being sure to honor their lives.

Silence ensued. Reinhard had taken his hand from his heart, standing upright in front of his friend. After a moment, he opened his mouth and questioned, "What shall I do now?"

Subaru looked at him, responding without missing a beat, "Go. There are a lot of people here that need your help. Protect them; keep them safe."

Reinhard only nodded, immediately accepting the task. It wasn't just his duty, but it was also the right thing to do.

However, a question still lingered in Reinhard's head, looking at Subaru before quickly asking, "What about you?"

His friend didn't look back at him right away, but Reinhard saw as his expression shifted into one more akin to seriousness. "I have to take care of someone," he said, his voice low with hints of remorse and sadness. He looked to Reinhard, continuing to speak in the same, if not similar, tone, "It'll probably be best if you stay away from the action. Focus on helping the people that need it."

This time, Reinhard chose to try and argue, "And what of you? By the sounds of it, you'll be heading directly into danger. Will you be alright?"

"Trust me, I'll be fine. I've got a bit of a plan," Subaru reassured, a slight smile once again gracing his face. Though, from his words, Reinhard remained a bit concerned. "And don't worry, once all of this is over, I'll be sure to explain everything that I can."

Reinhard nodded, reluctantly accepting the answer. While he was still worried for his friend, he would respect the statement he was given. The current situation was getting more and more dire as the moments passed. Subaru was right in saying that he needed to help the citizens; he could not stray from that any longer.

Before he could dash off to fulfill his newfound task, Subaru quickly spoke, "Oh, before you go, can I ask for something?"

Reinhard looked at him, slightly hopeful and optimistic. "Of course, my friend. I will do my best to help you in any way possible. What is it that you need?"

"Ah ... well ..." Subaru trailed off, seemingly embarrassed. "Do you by chance have an extra scabbard lying around that I could use?"

People ran in waves, screaming and fleeing from a threat they all feared. They had no particular destination in mind, only running in a direction *she* wasn't.

Many took refuge in old buildings, stores, or even homes if the owners were hospitable. Though, many didn't have a place to go, so they only kept running.

However, even as people ran away, there were also people that ran *toward* the danger. One of such people was a boy with messy golden hair, wearing armor which represented the knights of Lugnica. The armor didn't cover him entirely, mainly covering his shoulders, part of his arms, shins, and some of his legs. His chest and back remained mostly bare.

If one looked closely, they would be able to see the man's sharp teeth as he ran frantically through the streets. A part of him was horrified at what he was seeing: destruction, chaos, and, most of all, the bodies of the dead.

Though he'd trained throughout the years, as a member of the Lugnican Royal Knights, to resist being affected by those types of things, he couldn't help but be disgusted and horrified. His face scrunched and cringed, both at the gruesomeness of what he saw and the putrid smell which stubbornly lingered in the air.

As he moved, he noted that the destruction laid before him was not mindless. Someone, or something, was intentionally carving a path through the city, tearing through anyone that stood in the way. To where they were going, he did not know, but he dreaded ever finding out.

Despite the boy's typically tough exterior, he was terrified below the surface.

What kind of monster could do such terrible things to people so easily?

He worried, too. If someone so monstrous was loose in the Capital, then everyone was in danger. He thought of his family; he thought of the woman in which he held so dear to his heart.

He had to constantly suppress the urge to go to her — to find her and make sure that she was okay.

Despite that, he kept moving forward. He ran through the streets, unbothered by how out of breath he was becoming, as he scouted high and low for any sign of someone in need.

He had hardly passed anyone as he ran. Mostly everyone had already fled before his arrival in the area, but his patrol along the streets indicated that there were definitely a few stragglers. He'd tried to stop some of the people he passed, to ask if they were alright, but they seemed too scared to stop running.

Just as he ended that line of thought, a loud scream emanated from somewhere nearby. The knight immediately stopped in his tracks, his head shooting to look at where the scream came from.

It didn't take long for him to find the source. A building made of stone was at his left, ruined and destroyed. Amidst the rubble was a man who was trying his best to wiggle his way through a small gap, one of metal and stone, which condensed in on him as he tried to move.

The man screamed and yelled as he struggled, desperately flailing his arms in an attempt to grab something and escape. His torso remained stuck, proving that he was too big to fit, but he kept trying anyway. As a result, the gap further condensed on his body, squeezing and crushing into his waist.

As the man screamed louder, the boy rushed into action. At full speed, he ended up at the man's side in an instant, grabbing the edges of the gap with his bare hands. Then, with one action, he tore the stone apart, freeing the man from its unforgiving hold and letting him fall to the ground.

The destruction of the stone caused the building's structural stability to fail. The boy looked up, seeing the building's imminent collapse. He quickly turned around to face the ground, putting his back to the falling stone. He grabbed the man with both of his hands, bringing him close to his chest as the structure fell.

A mixture of dust and smoke erupted, creating a cloud which obscured the vision of anyone inside of it. It didn't take long for the cloud to settle, dissipating into the wind.

The man was shaking, his eyes clenched closed. When the sounds of destruction died down, he soon found himself aware of the fact that ... he was alive. He slowly opened

his eyes, wary of his surroundings and even his survival.

When the man retained more of his senses, he realized that he was being tightly gripped by a knight. The knight kicked away rocks below them, clearing the way so that he could slowly and carefully lower the man down onto the ground, which he reluctantly settled onto.

The knight quickly bent down at the man's side. He lifted the man's shirt, growling a bit at what he saw.

The man himself was, at first, confused. He slightly lifted his head, looking down at his own waist in order to settle his confusion, before immediately recoiling at what he'd seen.

His shirt was soaked in blood, a result of how torn his waist seemed to be. The condensing stone from the gap had torn through his skin and tissue on all sides, creating a bloody mess, to say the least. It looked as though he'd almost been cut cleanly in half.

Instinctively, the man tried to move his legs, but he couldn't. It hurt far too much to try moving, or do anything for that matter. Panic began to overwhelm him, screaming as the pain became more and more unbearable.

"Shit," the knight cursed. "Yer adrenalin' must've worn off."

The man could only look at the knight, taking rapid deep breaths as his panic failed to subside. The knight lifted his head, looking ahead of him, then to both of his sides.

When the knight lowered his head, he gave a small nod, as if to reassure both the man and himself. "Aight," he uttered, slipping both of his hands under the man's body. "This might hurt a bit."

Right after saying that, the knight stood up, taking the injured man along with him. The man failed to suppress a scream, the pain from being suddenly moved deeply affecting him.

"M sorry bout tha'," the knight apologized with a surprisingly light and sincere tone. The man had figured that, with his strong body and face, the knight's voice would've been a bit more ... deep? Gruff, perhaps? "I think I gotta place 'y can go t'. Yer gonna be aight."

With that, he started to move. As the knight hurried through the streets, he did his best to keep the man straight in his arms. The man was in a lot of pain, but he did his best to grit his teeth and bear it.

To help get his mind off of the pain, the man looked at the knight and did his best to speak, "Thank ... you."

The knight looked down at him, a small smile which showcased his sharp teeth on his face. "Yer'welcome!"

The man took a few deep breaths, but he chose to keep talking. "What's ... What's your name?"

It seemed as though the knight's smile got a bit wider, responding without missing a beat. "Garfiel Tinsel!"

The man's eyes actually widened at that information. He looked at Garfiel admirably. "You're ... You're Garfiel," the man spoke, almost quietly. "You're really 'The Amazing Garfiel' and—" the man coughed, "and your partner is ... 'The Beast Tamer Meili'."

"Yeah, tha's us," Garfiel chuckled, somewhat amused. With a momentary pause, Garfiel came to understand what the man was trying to do. So, without wasting much time, he asked back, "What's yer name?"

With a staggered breath, the man answered, "Just call me ... Delvin."

"Nice t' meet ya, Delvin!" Garfiel genuinely greeted. To keep the conversation going, he asked, "'Y got a family?"

The man, Delvin, took a breath, struggling a bit, but he still looked at Garfiel and responded anyway. "A ... wife," he said with a noticeably lower tone. He coughed a few times, but quickly recomposed. "She ... She died ... during the attack."

Garfiel's expression conveyed his heartfelt sympathy, but also overwhelming guilt. He felt as though, if he had gotten there sooner, he could have saved this man's wife. His inability to get there fast enough caused her death. With those thoughts in mind, he uttered, "Man, 'm sorry."

Delvin choked up a small laugh. "Don't be," he answered in a gruff voice. "I plan to ... honor her final words ... to me."

"What're they?"

The man tilted his head back, looking up into the sky, seeing the clouds as they slowly moved past. He responded in a single breath, "To live."

Garfiel's face shifted through a flurry of different emotions, before settling on something akin to understanding. Garfiel truly did understand Delvin's feelings, connecting with them on a very personal level.

It, in essence, reminded Garfiel of what had happened in the past. Times were tough — very tough. First it was Natsuki Subaru, his trusty and reliable Captain, who had disappeared. His absence caused the imminent destruction of the Emilia Camp, then eventually the downward spiral of everyone's lives.

Garfiel never blamed his Captain for anything, though. He knew that nothing was truly his fault. He knew that his Captain would probably try to put the blame onto himself, but Garfiel would never agree to such silly claims.

In fact, the entirety of the blame rested upon the Witch. Not the Witch of Envy, like one might think, but the Witch of Vainglory. This was the common consensus amongst his friends. If she hadn't gotten involved — if she hadn't taken his Captain away — none of the disasters that followed would have ever happened.

However, they still did. No matter how much one wanted those facts to go away, they would always and forevermore persist as a part of their cruel reality.

The death of his sister was one such reminder.

It brought Garfiel to one of the darkest times in his life. Before she passed on, Frederica had always been there to look after him. She still worked diligently, all for the sake of everyone around her. Then, she was just suddenly ... gone, taken from the world far too soon.

He'd nearly taken his own life on numerous occasions. He'd been lost, afraid, and alone. His sense of purpose was driven out of him, and he had seemingly nowhere to go. Sometimes he would mindlessly visit the statues of his Captain or the grave of his sister, only to cry.

That was how he lived for two whole years.

Then, by chance, he'd run into Mimi Pearlbaton. She'd recognized him and, annoyingly at the time, immediately noticed his terrible condition. She absolutely refused to leave him alone until he let her take care of him.

Reluctantly, he'd actually accepted and followed her back to a rather small, cheap apartment. Curiously, she was also living alone. When he'd asked her about it, she told him about the death of Anastasia, who was essentially her surrogate mother.

Desperate to save her, Mimi, her brothers, and others from the Iron Fang ended up losing most of their money paying for experimental treatments, which never worked, resulting in Anastasia's funds being completely expunged until there was practically nothing left.

Garfiel was aware of how wealthy the Royal Candidate was. Knowing that Mimi and the others spent all of her funds, all in hopes of saving her, brought a sense of sadness and sympathy with it. They'd really tried their best, but to no avail.

After Anastasia passed, the Mercenary group quickly disbanded. Mimi was forced to get a new job for herself and, quite frankly, she wasn't interested in going back to mercenary work. In the end, she'd found a decent hostess job at a fancy, well-paying restaurant. She wanted to leave her ways of a mercenary in the past and, for the most part, was succeeding.

As for her brothers, they both had their own paths and chosen careers in mind, which caused them to separate. Despite that, the three kept in touch and sent letters to one another pretty regularly.

At the time, Garfiel couldn't help but admire Mimi's persistence. In spite of losing everything, she still kept going and made a new life for herself. Although it was watered down, she still carried her typically carefree and energetic attitude, as well.

Garfiel felt an admiration for that, which drew him to talk to Mimi more and more. One thing led to another, and they eventually moved in together. After that, their direct support of each other only increased. By then, his mood and attitude had vastly improved, with his life turning around for the better.

He developed a small smile at the fond memories. Back then, Mimi had given him a new purpose and reason to keep living. That was why he could connect to Delvin's words and desire. He increased his pace, each of his steps weighed with more purpose.

"Do you ... have a family?" Delvin asked, breaking Garfiel's line of thought.

Garfiel smiled down at Delvin, his thoughts momentarily drifting before responding. "Yeah, I do. Yer actually 'boutta meet her."

Delvin didn't have a chance to respond, only able to adopt a slightly confused expression before a new voice called out: "Garf!"

Even whilst he was in pain, Delvin found the strength to turn his head to the side. Garfiel gradually slowed down as someone approached them. There stood a rather short demi-human girl. She had pretty, aqua-green eyes and short-cut orange hair. At the top of her head, there were big, orange cat ears, with a tail visible around at her backside.

She, at first, looked at Garfiel with a rather amazed, confused, and surprised face. However, upon seeing his own expression, she realized that something was wrong and looked down at what — or rather, whom — he was carrying in his arms.

She let out a light gasp, but quickly composed herself. Her face adopted a look of pure seriousness as she stepped to the side, raising her left arm and pointing to a particular building. "Bring 'im in there."

Garfiel did what she said without hesitation, carefully rushing into the building. Once inside, Delvin was amazed to see how many people there were. The building itself looked to be a large restaurant, one which was converted and expanded into a place to house refugees.

Two people, a man and a woman, came out from somewhere in the back. At his side, the demi-human girl spoke, "We got good medics here. He'll be okay."

When the two people offered to take Delvin from Garfiel's arms, the young knight obliged. The man was carefully exchanged in their arms and, immediately after being secured in the two medic's hold, was then rushed off to the back.

But, before Delvin got too far away, Garfiel called out one last thing, "Stay strong!"

Delvin let out a gruff laugh, but that was all he was able to manage. From that, Garfiel got the message. It would be absurd to think that the man would do anything less than give it his all.

At that, he smiled. He was happy that he'd saved Delvin's life. He'd successfully saved and protected him; he'd shielded him.

Those self-inspiring thoughts were interrupted by a sudden embrace. Looking down, he found that a certain someone had gently latched herself onto him. Her face was buried into his chest, which he thought was cute. He failed to lose his smile, putting one arm around her and steadily raising the other so that he could pat her head.

He lightly stroked her hair, even going as far as to rub her ears a little bit. He knew that she always liked that.

"I missed ya, Mimi."

She momentarily stiffened, quickly relaxing afterward. He could feel her snuffle into his chest. She tilted her head up, meeting his eyes. Garfiel could see the tears starting to form, but, before he could express his concern, she responded, "Missed ya too, Garf."

Garfiel's smile threatened to drop, but he didn't let it. Instead, he tried to make light of things. "Ye really got back in th' swing o'things here. Impressive."

She lowered her head a bit and looked off to the side, lightly scoffing at his praise. She kept her head down, choosing to look around at the many different people taking shelter inside of the building. "We're trained fer this type'a thing. Tha' trainin' never fades."

Garfiel acknowledged Mimi's words with a nod. He, too, started to look around the building. The amount of unity amongst them was inspiring. No matter your race or familial status, everyone was helping each other. They handed one another food, shared clothing, took turns sleeping in the same cot, and they even helped one another with less fatal or serious injuries.

Garfiel loved seeing that.

"How could'ya leave fer so lon'!" Mimi suddenly exclaimed, momentarily staggering him and immediately taking him off guard.

Her words completely broke his mind away from his previous thoughts. Her hurt and sadness was clearly present on her face, only serving to spike the increasing guilt that Garfiel felt. Even so, he knew it was just like Mimi to be so emotionally driven.

She struggled to speak again for a few seconds, but it didn't take only for her to cry out again. "Ya didn't visit, ya didn't write ... I—"

She paused, taking her eyes off of him and looking away, her gaze lingering toward the many people nearby. Her posture quickly shifted as she did her best to recompose herself, having realized the slight slip she'd made with her words.

Even so, she kept stealing glances at him. He noticed it, too. In the midst of everything, she still revealed exactly what she really wanted to do.

In the midst of those thoughts, he suddenly felt something lightly press against him. He looked back down, seeing the side of Mimi's fist against his stomach. Glancing at her face, he could see water droplets start to make their way down her cheeks.

"I was worried bout ya, Garf," she nearly whispered, keeping her head low. The fist against his chest tightened just a little bit more, as did her other hand, as she spoke again, "'S been so long. I ... I thought tha' y' might've been ..."

Garfiel stopped Mimi there by putting both of his arms around her and pulling her into a tight, securing hug. She returned the tight embrace with her own, crying a little into his chest, but he didn't mind. He rubbed his hands against her back a bit, trying to calm and soothe her.

"S okay, Mimi. 'M here now."

The two of them stayed in that embrace for a good few minutes. Mimi had a lot of emotion bottled up inside, and Garfiel was more than happy to let her vent it out on him.

Garfiel's heart broke at seeing her this way. It was a sight that he'd never liked seeing. He knew that she didn't really want him to join the Knights, but she'd supported him anyway. After all of the years he'd been away for, fighting in such a gruesome, brutal, and rather pointless war, there was no doubt to him that, for all of this time, she'd been fearing his possible death.

The thought made him hold her just a bit tighter. He rested his head on hers, continuing to rub her back. He took slow, deep breaths, as he repeated his motions in a calm, relaxing loop. While he wanted to make her feel better, he realized that he wanted to make himself feel better, too.

Mimi had been the one to pull away first. Garfiel obliged, not wanting to forcefully keep her close to him. Despite having slightly pulled back, she kept her arms firmly placed around him while her head angled up.

It was then that Garfiel took another good look at her. Mimi's cute face was stained by her own tears, her eyes and cheeks still prominently wet. It was only when she removed a single arm from around him, using it to wipe her face, that it dried.

She looked down again. Garfiel was starting to get nervous, afraid that Mimi was mad at him. He was afraid that she, perhaps, didn't even want to look at him.

"Y'know ... there're rumors spreadin' around," she suddenly whispered, surprising him. "A woman n' her family came in awhile ago. She said tha' ... th' 'hero' saved her."

Garfiel blinked. While he registered her words, he found himself confused. At first, he wasn't sure as to what she meant, playing the word "hero" in his head multiple times in an attempt to figure out who exactly it referred to.

However, it soon dawned on him that there was only one real answer.

His eyes widened. Garfiel had told Mimi, long ago, what had happened to his Captain. She understood things as much as he did; they were in the loop on the same level. So ... she knew that he was gone.

... But, since she knew, why would she be telling him this?

He looked down at her, his shock ever so present on his face. "Ya don't mean ..."

Mimi looked up at him, their eyes meeting once again. It was as if they could read each other's emotions at that moment. She nodded, "They're sayin' he's back."

Garfiel had to prevent himself from yelling "Cap'n!" at the top of his lungs. The overwhelming shock and anticipation started to eat away at him, but he held himself together on a whim.

When Mimi's head angled itself back down, her ears visibly drooping, Garfiel found himself worried again. She was sad, he could tell, but he didn't completely understand why.

Mumbling, she voiced in a soft-spoken tone, "I suppose yer gonna go find 'im n' help, aren't ya ..."

...

He understood, now.

She was sad because she thought that he was going to leave her again.

A pit began to form in his stomach. He absolutely hated seeing his wife so upset. If he could, he'd make her the happiest girl in the world every day. But he couldn't, and he hated that.

Ultimately, he felt like a failure of a husband, having left her alone for so long. A part of him was surprised that she hadn't left him for someone better by now. Still, she never did, despite how lousy he was. Truly, Mimi was too good for him.

After looking at his wife, he picked up his head and glanced around the place. Nothing much had changed since he last looked, but he kept observing anyway.

Even with their unity, these people were scared. They were still just normal civilians. Even if Mimi and some of the other staff were former mercenaries, they were still very minimally guarded.

They needed protection. They needed shielding. They needed to feel safe.

They needed him.

Looking down at Mimi; looking at her tearful, saddened face, he knew that *she* needed him, too.

So, as much as he wanted to see his Captain again, he knew that there was someone more important to him that came first. He made his decision.

"M stayin'."

Mimi's reaction was immediate. Her ears perked up, her eyes widening, and her head shot up so that she could properly look at him again. She wanted to ask him why, but her curious, confused expression was enough for him to understand.

"Ya need me more," he said to her. "Ya'll do." He smiled down at her, cupping her cheek with his hand. "Family 's more important t' me than anythin'."

At first, Mimi could only blink at him, unable to find the proper words to use. But, after a few seconds, her face began to scrunch up, her eyes once again welling with tears. She planted herself into his chest, hugging him tightly all the while.

Garfiel could only smile, returning the embrace with one arm and using his other hand to gently pet her head. From the way her tail swayed back and forth, he could tell that she was very happy.

When they separated, the two smiled at each other. Garfiel pointed a thumb to the outdoors, parting his lips to speak with a newfound anticipation, "Let's go patrol outside, yea?"

Mimi vigorously nodded. They joined their hands, walking through the doors together to begin their patrol together. In the midst of a crisis, the two were just happy to be together again.

A girl walked through the streets of Lugnica. Her long, braided, dark-blue hair barely hovered over her back. Her yellow-green eyes scanned everything nearby, looking in every building, every alleyway, and at every body which lay dead on the ground.

Much to her disdain, she was forced to step over a corpse seemingly every few minutes. Other than having to put in extra effort to step over them, that fact hardly bothered her. She had long since become accustomed to death and the gruesome sights that followed. The bodies which laid before her failed to trigger even a simple churn in her stomach.

Only the concern for her family could do that.

She continued stepping over bodies until, eventually, she came to a clearing. There she stopped, taking a moment to thoroughly scan her surroundings once more. She remained composed with a straight face, despite her innermost feelings. The stress of handling her worries alone threatened to eat her from the inside out.

Well, she wasn't *entirely* alone.

"How much farther, Shaula?"

She turned her head to the side, glancing down at the small crimson scorpion which rested upon her left shoulder. In response to her question, the scorpion snapped its claws and thrust them forward.

The girl sighed, moving her gaze back to the street in front of her. "So, still a bit of a way to go?"

The scorpion snapped its claws again, confirming the girl's inquiry. She sighed again, immediately picking up her feet and continuing her walk forward.

"Just let me know when we're close, okay?"

The little scorpion snapped its claws twice.

And so the girl resumed her quest.

This girl was Meili Natsuki, formerly Portroute. She'd taken her new name as a tribute to the man she came to think so highly of. In more ways than one, Natsuki Subaru had been a great influence on her life.

Over the years, she hadn't really changed much. In a way, she'd ended up slipping back into the habits she used to have as an assassin. She, however, never really thought anything of it. By joining the knights, she believed that she could put those skills to good use and, in many instances, she had successfully done so.

Though, at times, she couldn't help but feel as though Subaru would be disappointed in her. She wanted to make him proud by making a difference in the world, just like he had. But was she really doing things the right way?

She'd ask herself that question a lot. At times, it would haunt her. Sometimes, she'd cry herself to sleep over its looming effects and meanings. If she wasn't doing things the right way, he would surely be disappointed and upset with her. She didn't want him to feel that way about her, not one bit.

So she tried to make up for it. She did her best to help those in need, amongst her duties in the army, but she feared that it would never be enough. To try and drown out her own sadness, she did her best to spread his memory.

Ironically, as she did that, she always ended up thinking about how he wouldn't want her thinking so lowly of herself. She knew that he'd smile at her, maybe pat her head, and tell her that everything would be okay. He'd comfort her, connect with her, and just generally be there for her.

Finding out that he wasn't there anymore was one of the hardest days of her life. The single spark of hope she had at having a normal life was extinguished in an instant. Only Petra and Frederica could truly comfort her that first night.

She would never forgive the Witch that took him away.

Luckily, as time passed, she had found a new family for herself. Things gradually began to get better, even as they moved from the mansion to the Capital. She had people who she could trust and lean on; people who she could confide in and vent to.

However, not all good things last forever. When Frederica passed, things went downhill fast. They each had to take jobs in order to get by. It was then that Meili had truly started to dip back into her assassin roots, taking smaller jobs for a halfway decent payout.

Combined with what Louis and Petra made, they were able to afford living in their home and put food on the table, while using the extra money to get extra appliances here and there. Together, as a family, they were able to get through the worst of things.

That was why she so actively scoured the streets now, letting her worry get the better of her. When the worst hit, they were supposed to stick together, right?

As if on cue, Shaula, her little scorpion friend, snapped her claws. Meili drew her mind out from the depressive thoughts which began to consume her, stopping in her advance and glancing down at the scorpion on her shoulder. Shaula thrust her claw to the left, toward the entrance of a rather dark alleyway, indicating that they were in the right spot.

Meili seemed unsure at first, looking from Shaula to the alleyway with uncertainty in her gaze. "Are you sure this is the right place, Shaula?"

The scorpion snapped its claws twice, as if it were saying "yes." Meili took her little friend's word for it. After all, Shaula had really honed her tracking ability over the years. If she was sure that this was the spot, then it was.

Taking her first steps forward, Meili found herself shrouded by the darkness as she entered the alleyway. At first, it was difficult to see, after just coming from being in the light, but her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness around her.

Then, she looked down.

A loud gasp escaped her lips, and she couldn't help but take a few steps back. Considering her reputation and her built-up resistance to such things, that type of reaction from her was almost shocking and out of character.

But ... she just couldn't help it. This sight ... it wasn't like the rest.

Her legs gave out, making her fall onto her butt, almost like she'd slipped. Her eyes widened as she found herself uncharacteristically shaking, horrified.

In front of her eyes was not one, but two bodies. They weren't just any bodies; no, they were her *family*.

"P-Petra? Louis?"

They were dead.

Both were dead.

... They were gone.

Meili's eyes shook as she looked at them. There was just so much dried blood. Their wounds were brutal, giving her the impression that they both died in agony.

She found herself moving forward, positioning herself on her knees and crawling toward Petra, who was laying the closest. When she finally reached Petra's body, Meili could only look at her face. The dried blood on her lips, with the small gashes and scrapes on her cheeks.

Meili hated it.

Yet Petra's closed eyes indicated that she may have died peacefully.

Meili couldn't help but doubt that.

She glanced up at Louis. Her blood was similarly dried, spread out in a pool along with her intestines on the ground. Her stomach had a gaping hole in the center of it, suggesting that someone, or something, had torn straight through it.

Suddenly, Meili felt a sense of rage surge throughout her entire body.

Instinctively, she balled up her hand into a fist, raised it, and struck the ground. It hurt, but she ignored it. She struck it again. Then again. Then again, and again, and again until she finally felt satisfied.

Her hand was bloodied by that point, but she hardly cared, or even noticed. She felt some of her rage subside, replaced by a wave of immense sadness. She didn't even look at her now injured hand, keeping her gaze on the two people that meant everything to her.

Her gaze trailed down to Petra's chest, freezing at the sight. She tilted her head, her eyes staying in their widened position, as if they were in a daze.

"Ice ...?"

A pained, yet stoic utter escaped from her lips. A large chunk of ice protruded from Petra's stomach, covered and dried in her blood.

Meili knew only *one person* who could generate this type of powerful ice. She knew only *one person* who knew both Petra and Louis.

A sense of betrayal washed over her. For a moment, disbelief found its way into her heart, too. However, neither of those two feelings stayed for long, quickly being replaced by something much more focused and fierce.

She grit her teeth, her fists clenching until her uninjured hand became almost as red as the other. With rage, she lowly growled, "... Emilia ..."

She was brought out of her rageful daze when Shaula snapped her claws, gaining her attention. Meili lightly shook her head, quickly composing herself and finally loosening her hands.

She looked down at Petra one last time, her eyes being drawn to the red ribbon which stayed in her hair. It was something that she'd always worn, even as she'd gotten older.

Now, it was something that she'd died with.

Hesitantly, Meili reached up and gently grabbed hold of it with her non-bloodied hand. Then, just as gently, she took it off of Petra's head. Meili brought it closer to her, holding it in front of her and intently looking at it for more than just a few moments.

After that, she slowly brought it close to her chest. When it finally made contact, she moved her arms around it as if she were embracing it, sitting properly on her knees and holding it close as she let out light snuffles. A few tears rolled down her cheeks, but she didn't sob.

Within a minute, she stopped crying. With one last snuffle, she wiped her tears with the arm of her bloodied hand, using her other hand to properly grab hold of the ribbon. She took a deep breath through her nose, then released it in a drawn-out exhale through her mouth.

Meili stood up, her eyes tracking to Louis as her legs walked her around Petra's body on their own. When she reached the blonde's corpse, she knelt down and gently lifted

one of her deceased friend's hands. Around its wrist was a pretty, beaded bracelet, sporting a light-yellowish color to match the girl's blonde hair. She carefully removed the accessory from Louis' wrist, too.

After that, she stood up again. She turned around, facing the exit. She took a few steps forward, but something else caught her eye.

She kneeled down again, this time next to Petra. She reached out with her bloodied hand, firmly grasping onto a shiny, yet stained object on the ground. Meili picked it up, lightly bringing it up so that she could clearly look at it.

It was Petra's dagger. Meili remembered it all too well. She was the one that had gotten it *with* Petra, after all. She'd even helped Petra train with it, too.

Now, it was stained with blood.

Shaula perked up on her shoulder, her attention seemingly drawn to the blade. She snapped her claws, gaining Meili's attention, before thrusting them off to the side, toward the exit.

Meili glanced down at Shaula curiously. "You can find her?"

Shaula snapped her claws twice, confirming Meili's inquiry. Meili herself showed no immediate visible reaction to that, only slowly raising her head and looking toward the exit.

She lowered the dagger to her side, still gripping it tightly in her hand. Then, she took a step forward, followed quickly by another. She began walking out of the alleyway and onto the street once more, her eyes narrowed as a mirror to her intentions.

"Show me the way."

***Chapter 15*: Re:Turn**

Sorry for the delay on this one. There was quite a bit of trial and error for me here, but I think that I've finally cracked it down. I like how this turned out, for the most part, and I'm hoping that you all will like it too!

Thanks for the reviews, as well! I read every single one! I really appreciate all of the support from you all! I look forward to seeing what you have to say after this one!

Enjoy!

Chapter 15: Re:Turn

A figure calmly stepped through the city streets, their feet even and unwavering in their pace. The person walking, a girl, held a very indifferent expression. Her gaze remained forward, focused only on moving to her determined destination.

The girl herself had a great face. It was a face that one would typically call beautiful; a face that would catch a lot of positive attraction. However, now it was only associated with terror and dread. Despite the indifference in her expression, vast emotions bubbled and welled beneath the surface.

Though all of that hardly mattered. Not to her, and not to anyone else.

She was alone. She always would be. That was a fact that she had accepted.

That was why she didn't care. Nothing could faze her; not anymore.

That was why, despite all of her heinous deeds, her expression remained cold and unchanging.

Her clothes, which had been purchased fresh and new mere days ago, were stained with blood. The amount of blood varied — some splotches new and wet, some splotches old and dry. The bottoms of her shoes were painted red, the puddles she stepped in providing a new coat each and every time.

She hardly cared. She never really liked shoes, anyway.

Her entire outfit was but a sad, unpleasant reminder of what she once had. It was a reminder of what she'd so helplessly lost. Its new, bloody features seemed symbolic of that, in a way.

Still, her body and skin remained untainted. There was nothing, not a scratch, bruise, or stain on her pristine, practically perfect form. To her, that endless, unnatural perfection was a reminder of what she truly was, and always would be. It was a reminder that the happiness she once aspired and hoped to have was never even attainable in the first place.

Truly, she was hopeless. A walking freak of nature.

Suddenly, she stopped walking. She'd finally reached her destination. After all of those pointless, annoying obstacles, she'd finally made it.

...

Why had she wanted to come here, again?

Her head angled upward, her eyes meeting a large face of stone. Her gaze narrowed at it, but no other expression was given, and no action was taken.

She'd willed herself to get here. She walked through the Capital, tearing through anyone that dared stand in her way, and for what? So she could just stand there, looking at a piece of stone?

That's right. She marched through the Capital, all the way to its center, just so she could look at a measly statue. Though, this wasn't just any statue; it was a commemorative statue — one that honored a fallen hero.

In truth, at the time, he hadn't truly fallen. Now, however, he did. She knew that all too well.

... And she hated it.

Looking up at the statue, she could feel her dormant emotions rising. Just by looking at its face, she felt a sense of longing. She so desperately wanted to hold it in her arms, close to her chest, and never let it go.

She knew that she couldn't, for that time had passed.

Her gaze lowered, finding a podium at the base of the statue. She adjusted herself slightly, slowly walking in front of it. There were words written and inscribed on its surface:

Under the guidance of Queen Felt, this statue stands to commemorate the heroic actions, deeds and sacrifices of the young Natsuki Subaru.

She didn't read any more after that.

With a quick, sudden motion, she grabbed its side with her left hand and flung it out of her way. She'd used more than enough force, tearing it from its station on the ground and sending it tumbling until it finally slammed into a building not too far away. The resulting impact caused the structure to break apart and crumble at its front, breaking glass, causing a lot of excess noise, and ultimately causing more chained destruction as a result.

She barely paid any attention to it. She stepped closer to the statue itself, her eyes failing to be torn away from its base. Once she was close enough, she stopped again.

Strangely, she extended her hand out to it. Her hand didn't stop, instead gently coming into contact with the statue's surprisingly smooth, yet cold, surface. As she touched it, her sense of longing and desire surfaced again.

As quick as those emotions came, they left. They were replaced by something else — something more ferocious and angry. She quickly retracted her hand, raising her right leg, and furiously began to stomp at the statue's base.

The first hit formed a sizable crater in the stone's surface, spidering cracks throughout the entire monument. The second hit destabilized it even more, even going as far as to break bits and pieces of stone from the main structure. The third hit was its downfall, destroying enough of the base so that the statue could collapse and crash to the ground.

Anything beyond that was intentionally overkill.

The statue began to fall over, a deep creak and hum following it down. When it collided with the ground, a loud crash boomed throughout the area, the sound of cracking and breaking of stone invading her ears. A small puff cloud of dirt kicked up into the air, but it hardly bothered her. She didn't even close her eyes.

When everything settled, her eyes looked upon the rubble. The statue, broken and in pieces, lay on its side. It wasn't whole anymore, a remnant of what it once stood for. It was almost ironic, she thought.

Oddly enough, as she continued to gaze upon the broken stone, she felt satisfied. It wasn't because she had vented her emotions out; no, it was because destroying the statue was symbolic to her. In a way, it was her letting go, despite how much she didn't want to.

Whether she liked it or not, she needed to face reality. Destroying the statue was supposed to show her that; it was supposed to show her that he was gone, but true acceptance failed to grasp her broken mind.

Her mindless rampage was because of that semblance of acceptance, however. She'd done all of this *because* a part of her knew the reality of things. Yet, why did this stubborn, annoying other half of her decide to cling to something that wasn't there anymore?

She wanted to purge it. She didn't need that part of her anymore.

With her satisfaction now realized, she felt ready to fully let go. She'd shown them her pain, and she'd gotten her minuscule sense of closure. She felt ready to join her beloved.

Though, would he even still accept her?

No, that didn't matter.

As long as she was with him, finally freed from the curse and torment of living, she would be happy.

She only wished it were easy.

Even with a good part of her feeling satisfied, ready to move on, there was another part of her that felt ... differently. It was a side of her that felt next to nothing at all, and, when it did feel something, it was always a sense of anger, a desire for bloodlust.

It was still angry at the world; it was angry at everything.

The girl suddenly gripped her head, gritting her teeth and bending her knees. She huddled down, her hands gripping and pulling tightly at her hair. Her breathing suddenly became irregular, heavy and slightly hitched.

She was in pain. Deep, internal pain. Physically she was whole, but mentally, she was shattered.

One side of her wished to let go, while the other wished to take its anger out on the world, along with the people living in it. That anger sparked a want for revenge, its desire fueled by the peaks of her insanity.

Her anger was justified, right? She had a right to be angry.

After all, the world had harmed her — hurt her — so why couldn't she keep hurting it back?

She'd lost the person she loved. He'd meant everything to her, and now he was gone. The chance to live happily with him, to start a family, was quelled in a matter of seconds.

She needed him. She was nothing without him anymore.

It wasn't fair.

...

People were nearby; she could feel it. Cowering in what meager sanctuaries they had. In her despair, some people in particular had caught her attention. There were three of them, hiding together not too far away in a small, ordinary, and fragile building.

She felt a sudden urge to go after them. There was a sudden influx of anger and envy surging from inside of her. One side wished to stop everything, while the other desired to cause suffering based on the whims of her loss.

This was okay, right—?

Yes— Yes, of course it was. Her feelings were justified, and they deserved it.

But he would really dislike it—

That didn't matter anymore ... He was gone.

It would hurt him—

Those people deserved to hurt more! They were the ones that took him away!

He would hate her—

She hated herself more.

...

There's nothing to hold her back. There's nothing to stop her. These are the people who made her suffer, so she would make them suffer in turn.

Her body stiffened, her arms slowly lowering back down to her sides. Her expression eerily settled back to one of indifference, her eyes staring blankly ahead while her body rose like a mindless drone.

Then, for several moments, she only stood still.

...

In an instant, she appeared right beside the building she'd singled out. She burst through the wall, the sight of a cowering family immediately meeting her eyes. A father, a mother, and their young son.

The father, though clearly afraid, took a defensive stance. He firmly grasped a smooth, cylinder metal bar in both of his hands, glaring her down with heated intensity.

He yelled at his wife and son to run, lunging forward to attack the Witch standing a mere few feet in front of him. His wife and son quickly ran past, making for the exit as the metal bar drew close to hitting its target.

The bar stopped dead in its tracks, much to the man's surprise. His eyes widened, taking an instinctive step backward due to his initial shock. The Witch, as inexpressive as ever, had moved her left arm at unseeable speeds and grabbed hold of the makeshift weapon.

Her eyes failed to move away from the man, unblinkingly staring him down. The metal bar then crunched, bending unnaturally as her grip gradually increased, before then breaking in two at the base of her hand. The top half of the metal bar fell to the floor, crashing against it with a loud, echoed clank.

The man wouldn't let such an intimidating display sway him, however, as he clenched his opposite hand and made a quick, wide swing at her face.

It never even got close.

Her right hand moved at the same unseeable speed, grabbing his wrist and effortlessly holding it in place. The man grit his teeth, immediately feeling the pressure of her grip.

She still didn't move her eyes. Her hand moved against his wrist, pushing forward so that his hand would bend upward in an easy, fluid, yet slow motion. Painful snaps and

cracks sounded from his wrist, his screams echoing throughout the building as it bent further and further back.

Eventually, his wrist fully bent back. His hand now unnaturally pointed toward his body, sickeningly resting on his forearm. The unimaginable pain he felt was near immeasurable to him, but the Witch still hadn't let go. She kept applying pressure, causing more pain and forcing him to his knees.

Suddenly, her grip tightened further, her body swinging itself around in one, fast motion. The man swung with her, forced into the air due to the Witch's incredible strength.

After she'd completely reversed, she let go.

He was sent flying, released from her grip, directly toward the building's wall. The force behind the throw was so strong that he not only slammed into it, but he also crashed through it. The man broke through brick and stone, greatly slowing his momentum, before tumbling on the ground. His body rolled for a few seconds before settling, motionless and unmoving.

Not too far away, a boy screamed out for his father. He broke out of his mother's grasp and ran back toward the scene at full speed. His eyes were already full of tears when he got there, only worsening as he looked down upon his father's body.

The body was covered and surrounded by bits of rubble. The man's face was covered in blood, his nose indenting into his face and his jaw torn off at a single side, hanging down by his neck. A single eye was cut and gouged by a sharp piece of stone, and most of his limbs were bent at unnatural angles.

The boy wanted to look away, desperately so, but he couldn't. He could only cry as he looked at his father, silently pleading for the man to get up and comfort him.

But that would never happen again. His father was gone.

A shadow loomed over him, and the boy's gaze immediately shot up. The Witch stood over him, her emotionless stare aimed down at him. The boy froze, petrified, only able to stare up at his imminent demise.

A loud shout was heard, but neither the Witch or the boy turned to look at it. The Witch, however, reacted, extending her right arm out to the side and grabbing hold of an attacker.

Only when the yell ceased, and the sounds of gurgled struggling began, did the boy change his gaze. His eyes widened, haunted by the sight of his mother being held up by the throat. She was raised up into the air with next to no effort, choking and futilely grabbing at her throat in an attempt to free herself.

The Witch's eyes tracked to the boy's mother, shifting her focus onto the woman she held in the grip of her hand. The woman repeatedly tried to grab the Witch's wrist, but her strength proved little against the Witch's overwhelming Authority.

The Witch thrust her left hand toward the woman's stomach with one motion, penetrating through her body with little difficulty. The woman let out a pained gasp, struggling to breathe, as bits of blood spurted out. The Witch's hand intentionally moved and dug around in the woman's body, feeling her organs and insides while the woman became more limp in her grasp.

Then, her hand suddenly grabbed hold of something, ripping it out in one fast movement. The Witch looked at it, viewing the bloody sight of a still beating heart. She looked back at the woman, who'd gone fully limp. The Witch dropped the woman's body, letting it fall to the ground, dead.

She then squeezed the heart in her hand, crushing it and making it explode with a splash of blood. It stained her clothes, but any which hit her skin seemed to fade as the

seconds passed.

Her head slowly and eerily turned back to the boy, her eyes staring into his soul with the same cold, indifferent stare. He hadn't moved, stuck frozen and shaking in place. The shock of seeing his father's body and watching his mother die was too great for him to bear.

He remained still, even as she took small steps closer to him. He could only stare at her, petrified. She extended her hand, reaching out for his throat and easily grabbing hold of it. The boy immediately felt the pressure of her grasp, choking and struggling to breath as he was lifted into the air.

He quickly felt lightheaded. The pressure around his neck made him think that it would snap with even the slightest squeeze. He truly believed that he was about to die.

He was so, so scared.

"Let the boy go."

A new voice called out from nearby, garnering the attention of both the Witch and the boy. She turned to face the source, subsequently making the boy do the same.

The boy then felt some of his fear and despair vanish, struck by a sudden ray of hope. His eyes met a man dressed in a mix of armor and ragged civilian clothes. There were bags under his eyes and a stubble on his face.

He looked similar to that of a man from the slums, despite his knightly armor, yet he stood in his place with a sense of authority. His violet-colored hair lightly swayed in the breeze, his face hardened and yellow eyes narrowed. This man was an actual knight.

The seriousness on his face was not missed, his lips moving to repeat his order.

"Let the boy go, now."

The words were said with more intensity this time, conveying a sense of purpose and urgency. The Witch, however, paid that no mind. Her eyes looked between the two; first the knight, then the boy, then back to the knight again. Her expression remained neigh expressionless, her arm dangling the boy out in front of her with an unrelenting grip.

SNAP!

The knight's eyes immediately widened in shock, his mouth unwillingly becoming agape. The Witch had suddenly, ruthlessly and without mercy, crushed the boy's neck in her hand. His neck snapped immediately, her hand breaking through flesh and bone to form a complete fist in the middle.

The boy's head was essentially cut off from his body, only barely remaining connected through strands of both thick and thin red tissue. The boy's mouth was hung wide open, and the knight swore that he'd seen the boy's eyes desperately dart around for a few seconds after it all happened.

The knight was forced to watch as the boy's head fully snapped away from the rest of his body, falling to the ground and lightly bouncing a few times like a deflated ball, before it rolled to a stop. The rest of the boy's body slipped from the Witch's grip, simply falling to the ground, falling to its side.

The knight was horrified. Despite how much he wished to look elsewhere, his gaze was stuck on the body. The bloody sight before him was of an innocent child; a child that he was powerless and unable to save. It shook him to his inner core and soul.

However, the knight took a deep breath. He forced himself to steady, finally picking up his gaze and directing it back toward the culprit, who hadn't moved an inch. As she looked at him, he looked back with newfound rage and contempt. His expression mirrored those feelings, his teeth gritting into an aggressive, undignified snarl.

"You will pay for that," he growled out. His hand reached to his side, his head tilting slightly down, eyes closing as his palm rested upon the hilt of his sword. "It is time that your rampage comes to an end."

His fingers wrapped securely around the handle and, with one fluid motion of his arm, he pulled the blade out of its scabbard. His eyes opened, intently staring down his adversary. He then gripped the blade's hilt with both of his hands, holding it out readily in front of him.

"Pandora, the Witch of Vainglory," he spoke again, his voice low yet noticeably laced with renowned venom. "I never thought it possible to encounter you again. Whether it be a blessing or a curse, it does not matter. I failed to protect my friend from you once; I will not fail to protect these people now."

She failed to respond, only keeping her gaze locked on him. The knight, however, didn't do the same, instead closing his eyes again and letting his body gradually begin to relax. It was strange, given the situation he was currently in, but it would soon prove to be immensely worthwhile.

He willed a sense of focus into his sword, subconsciously tightening the grip both of his hands had on the hilt. He could feel the blade emanating with power, calling for and drawing at the forces of nature around him.

The blade itself began to glow as a soft, light, yet satisfying hum unnaturally resonated from the metal itself. It was at the humming's peak when Julius opened his eyes again, once again staring down his opponent with a fierce glare.

"I, Julius Juukulus, the Spirit Knight of this kingdom, will strike you down, here and now."

In that moment, various multi-colored orbs began to appear around him. Then, they started to branch out, going further and further to the point where nearly a few hundred surrounded them both, covering the entire area with various glowing lights.

Julius was surprised, but he withheld it. The sheer amount of spirits nearby was nearly staggering. Even without any existing contract, he could feel their power flow through the blade of the sword. It was almost like a beacon, able to summon various spirits and draw upon their power, funneling it through the blade.

Was this the true power of the Spirit Sword?

At last, the Witch reacted. It was merely a raised eyebrow, signifying a sense of amusement or curiosity, but Julius still heeded it no mind. Instead he chose to draw his focus to the blade of his sword, concentrating on the newfound power that he held in his hands.

The blade began to flow a bright red, catching aflame even with nothing to ignite it. Julius felt the heat of the flame from where he stood, but it failed to phase him as he raised the sword behind his head. Then, with a determined yell, he swung the blade forward in a horizontal slash.

The fire leapt from the blade, adopting the shape of swing and quickly spreading itself out in a wide, deadly arch as it shot forward. Pandora reacted in time, lowering herself just enough so that the fast-moving flame would just barely miss.

She could feel its scorching heat as it passed overhead, luckily dissipating before it could hit and potentially burn through any nearby buildings. That attack didn't burn like an ordinary fire; no, it burned much hotter than that. It held the combined might and power of dozens upon dozens of lesser fire spirits, after all.

Repulsive memories momentarily resurfaced. She remembered how a fire of similar intensity had encompassed her whole body, the smell of her own burning flesh having

invaded her nose as she burned alive. In her broken state of mind, it only served to fuel her need for carnage.

She righted herself, standing fully back on her feet from her previous position. The anchor which could keep those suppressed had been cut off. She was now stuck floating amongst a sea of blood without anything to keep her steady.

Nothing could prevent her from snapping again.

... It was already too late.

Pandora subtly shifted her stance.

Julius seemed amazed, looking at the sword while he sweat and took a few deep breaths. He hadn't expected his attack to be so intense, but he supposed that it only made sense. As he looked at the blade, it continued to softly hum.

Even without an existing contract, he felt as though he could hear the spirit's voices all around him. They supported him, cheered him on, gladly lending him their power in order to vanquish such a foe. He didn't even need an incantation to cast the spells he wishes to use.

Truly, the power of the sword he possessed was incredible.

His thoughts were suddenly interjected by various whispered screams invading his ears. It was the spirits; they were calling out to him. He couldn't audibly understand each of them, but he could still feel and make sense of the immense panic behind each of their cries. It was almost as if they were—

Julius' eyes widened, immediately sidestepping with surprising amounts of speed. His eyes tracked downward, catching sight of an arm in the place where he'd just stood, its hand balled into a fist.

Pandora had appeared beside him in the blink of an eye. He had been distracted, which nearly cost him his life.

The cries still echoed in his ears, telling him that things were not over just yet. With similar speeds, her arm moved horizontally to the side, aiming straight for his waist.

Julius reacted quickly, angling the blade of his sword down to block the strike. He flinched as her arm made contact with the sharp edge of his blade. From the amount of force the sword received, he was sure that her arm would've gone straight through him, had it connected. It was a miracle that the sword itself hadn't shattered on impact.

The blade stained itself with a familiar red liquid, making Julius' eyes widen. His eyes scanned the ground at his sides immediately, finding the bloody remains of a severed, pale forearm and hand.

His gaze quickly shot back to Pandora. She merely straightened her posture, raising her severed arm and looking at it with a slightly tilted head. Besides that, she showed no visible reaction to the injury at all.

It was horrifying.

Julius wasted no time, using the blade's already declined position to his advantage, jabbing its edge into the ground. It easily pierced through the dirt, emitting a different element as it hummed with power.

A thick wall of earth immediately sprung from the ground at a slanted position, aiming straight for Pandora's neck. She backstepped and ducked her head, avoiding the attack, but Julius wasn't done.

Another thick wall of earth shot straight up from behind her. It quickly moved horizontally, acting as a literal wall and pressing into her, pinning her to the other,

slanted wall. Pandora's neck hung over its edge, the wall at her back crushing and choking her as it continuously pinned and pushed against her.

Julius quickly took the edge of his blade out of the ground, pulling his arm back, pointing the blade upward, and thrusting it forward with speedy purpose. The tip of the blade pierced straight through her neck.

Blood spurted from the wound, spraying in front of her and even a little bit onto Julius. It hardly phased him; in fact, he almost relished in her demise, refusing to take his eyes off of her, even as she drew her final breaths. He kept watching as she went limp, blood continuing to spill from the wound at her neck, even as her body slumped against the stone and the sword pulled away.

Julius couldn't help but keep his eyes on her body for a few extra seconds, mainly in both astonishment and disbelief. A large part of him didn't believe what was happening; he needed to make sure that she was truly dead, gone for good.

Though, when he finally looked away, a heavy sigh escaped his lips. While it may have seemed easy, or even anticlimactic, it was finally over. He'd killed her; he was sure of it.

... Why did he still feel anxious?

The cries erupted in his ear again, making his eyes widen once more. The spirits tried to warn him, but he was unable to react in time. Something grabbed his back, effortlessly lifting him into the air before slamming him onto the ground in a matter of seconds.

Julius felt the wind get knocked out of him, making him take deep, heavy breaths. A sharp pain radiated in his chest, his broken ribs threatening to pierce through his lungs, but he still did his best to stand and recover.

His vision became blurry and his ears lightly rung, primarily from the force of his impact. However, he kept a tight grip on his sword, feeling as it began funneling powerful water magic through its blade, aiding his recovery and even healing him. Julius used a lot of his strength in trying to stand again, but he kept stumbling, unable to keep himself steady..

When his eyes started to adjust again, he could just make out the silhouette of a very familiar figure. He ended up on his knees, grunting as he struggled to stand. The figure walked around his side, his eyes keeping track of its every movement.

Julius could feel the effects of the sword's healing capabilities. The magic from the numerous water spirits around him accelerated his recovery by near immeasurable amounts. They healed his body, ridding him of physical exhaustion and allowing him to once again fully stand on his feet.

His vision cleared and his ears stopped ringing, allowing him to come to his senses and identify the figure in front of him. He stifled a small gasp at the sight.

Pandora stood before him, completely uninjured and clean of any blood, both on her body and clothes. His eyes darted to the walls of stone he'd conjured, shocked to see that her body was no longer there. Off to the side, he barely noticed the disappearance of her severed limb, as well.

... How was that even possible?

When he looked at her, Julius could see a small smile grace her lips. He recognized that smile. She'd held that same face ten years ago when they'd first met. It was as though she was mocking him, amused by his puny, meager efforts.

He felt taunted by it.

Julius readied the sword in front of him once again, glaring at Pandora with a newly heightened hatred and rage. Such feelings were unprofessional of him, that he knew,

but Julius couldn't help but let them rise, fueling him in his purpose and resolve.

He called upon the power of the spirits around him. They lent him their power as his blade heated up again, humming with intensity and drawing an immense heat, quickly bursting into a scolding flame.

This time, he thrust the edge of his blade forward and shot out a large, focused blast of flame. It shot toward the Witch at rapid speeds, and, to Julius' shock, she didn't even try to move out of the way. She let the blast of fire completely consume her, engulfing her entire body in a raging inferno.

Julius didn't stop firing until he was sure that she was incinerated. When the flames finally did dissipate, there was nothing left of the Witch's body.

The cries and warnings didn't cease, however, and so Julius turned on his heel, swinging his blade along with him, to strike at his backside. The blade stopped in its tracks, caught by a sudden rising hand.

Julius once again faced Pandora. She was, again, completely devoid of any physical injury, though her expression changed once more. This time, in place of her small, mocking smile was a more small, displeased, and unpleasant frown.

Her left hand held his sword, firmly locking it in place. Small streams of blood flowed from her hand, bleeding as a result of tightly gripping the sword's sharp edges. Julius hardly let such a drawback bother him, though, as he immediately began to draw upon the spirit's power once again.

The blade emitted a deeper hum this time, glowing a darker color for a just moment. Pandora suddenly felt a disconnection from her body, the effects of the spell rendering her completely unable to properly move or orient herself.

Julius jumped at the opportunity, forcefully pulling the sword from her grip. He imbued the sword with strong Yang magic in an instant, the blade itself beginning to shine with a white glow. Its constant hums seemed to amplify with a higher pitch as he moved the blade, thrusting it directly toward her at heightened speeds.

The sword finally plunged into her chest, the Yang magic imbued on the blade making its penetration seamless, its tip coming out the other side. Julius was easily able to cut through her body; it was like a hot knife through butter.

He brought the sword straight up, slicing through her flesh with ease. The blade started at her chest, vertically cutting through both her neck and face before exiting at the top of her head, drenched in her blood.

Her body split apart in a spurting, bloody mess, toppling to the ground, dead. Bits of guts and brains spilled onto the ground around the body, but he didn't waver one bit. Julius kept his eyes firmly on her body, this time. He dared not move or take his eyes away, lest she be reanimated again.

Unfortunately, he only needed to blink, and, in that instant, she was gone. Her entire body, the blood she left, the pieces of her brain on the ground ... They vanished, only to instantly reappear behind him, entirely whole again.

Even after that — even after such a gruesome death — she failed to be bothered by it. It shook Julius to his core, but he continued to persevere.

After that, a process began. He would kill her, she would come back. It repeated over, and over, and over again. An unending loop.

It didn't matter in which way she died.

She'd been impaled by an onslaught of ice spikes.

She'd be crushed and smashed by walls of Earth and stone.

She'd been blasted by deadly beams of Yang magic.

She'd even been beheaded and dismembered more than just once.

Julius was beginning to get tired. The Spirit Sword granted him endless supplies of Water magic through the spirits to heal and recover, but, while his physical state remained unaltered, his mental state only continued to drop.

The sword he held was strong, but she was stronger.

He was getting desperate. The longer this went on for, the more he realized that he was far too outmatched. This opponent was unlike anything he had ever faced before. She seemed immortal, and her strength seemed unnaturally enhanced, almost endless.

Julius became sure that she was only toying with him. Had she wanted him dead, he knew that she could've done it by now. Perhaps she was relishing in his frustration, he thought.

In one, last-ditch effort to end things once and for all, he began to draw elemental power to the blade again. This time, it wasn't just one element, but all of them.

The blade began to clad itself in a rainbow hue, charging an attack that he hadn't used in years: Al Clarista. The last time he'd used this spell, it was with his buds.

Though it deeply saddened him, he'd long accepted that they were no longer with him. With as many spirits as there were around him now, he theorized that this attack would completely destroy her.

Yet, there she stood, unmoving and still, always watching him.

He glared ahead, the hue of his now rainbow sword glowing brightly as he sprung forth. He brought the blade behind his right shoulder and head, readying his strike as he charged Pandora with intense vigor and rage.

He reached her in seconds, swinging the blade forward in a devastating diagonal slash, completely and effortlessly cutting through her body. As she split apart, the area around them violently exploded under the force of the strike, the combined forces of magic annihilating both her body and creating a small crater in the ground.

When the light dimmed and the dust settled, Julius looked to find no trace of Pandora anywhere. He let his hope and relief foolishly get the better of him, as he took deep, tired breaths. He lowered his sword to his side, relaxing his arms, feeling as the blade's power drained.

The sword had protected him from the blast of his own attack, but he still felt exhausted. While it affected him physically, his condition of exhaustion was mostly mental.

But he had little time to dwell on that.

To his utter dread, the warnings and cries from the spirits erupted in his ears once more. He was too tired and distracted to move fast enough, trying to swing the blade backward, only for his wrist to be tightly blocked by Pandora's palm.

She twisted it, triggering an involuntary reflex which made him drop the sword, no matter how much he willed to keep hold of it. The many spirits around them began to fade away, having lost their beacon and anchor to stay. Her other hand shot up, grabbing him by the throat and effortlessly lifting him off of the ground.

She dangled him in the air, choking him. Julius looked down at her, directly into her emotionless, dead eyes as he gasped for air. Her grip was tight and unwavering; it would be futile to try to break free.

It was at that moment that Julius realized he'd failed. He couldn't protect the kingdom. He couldn't protect the people, or even his friends. As the Witch squeezed the life out of him, he acknowledged his uselessness.

His life flashed before his eyes. He believed that he'd finally reached the end of his life. Shockingly, he'd accepted that, closing his eyes and willingly awaited death. He didn't even try to fight it or resist.

"Let him go, Dora!"

A voice — an all too familiar one at that — called out from nearby. Julius quickly opened his eyes, becoming vigilant as Pandora quickly turned to face the speaker.

Both of their eyes widened at the same time, shocked to see who was standing not too far across from them.

There he stood, tall and ready, with his nasty-eyes narrowed. He wasn't glaring; no, he was focused. His black hair lightly flowed in the breeze, as did the collar of his tracksuit. The tracksuit itself looked somewhat worn, unlike how Julius had seen it the day before.

Natsuki Subaru was here.

Both Pandora and Julius could see the seriousness in his expression, and how his hands lightly clenched with unknown emotion. There was a new addition to his person: a sizable scabbard, wrapped around at his backside, containing a sword.

"Please," Subaru spoke again, his voice heavy as he pleaded. "Let him go, Dora."

Many questions raced through Julius' mind at that moment. Dora? Why did he call her that? Why did Subaru seem so familiar with her? Why did he sound so sympathetic? Why did it sound as if he was trying to reach out to her?

His thoughts were interrupted by a squeeze around his neck. Pandora's eyes narrowed at Subaru, thrusting Julius forward with her arm, trying to tempt him.

Subaru raised his hands up. It was a sign of nonaggression; a sign that he meant no harm. Julius was further shocked and confused at that, but he could hardly think about it due to the crushing pain around his throat.

"I know you're mad at me. Hell, you're probably furious," he started with an understanding tone as he slowly, cautiously, took a step forward. "And I get it. You have every right to feel that way."

He took another step closer, only to immediately stop when Pandora suddenly tightened her grip, threatening to crush Julius' throat. He stood still, keeping his hands up and his eyes glued to hers.

The two stood opposed to one another across the open area. On Pandora's right lay the broken statue of the man she'd let go. Now in front of her was that same man, alive and well, looking at her with those emotional, meaningful eyes of his.

They were eyes that conveyed his care for her — his sympathy and sentiment.

Pandora's face twitched a little.

"I also know that you're suffering," he continued. "You're in pain, and you're desperately trying to funnel it elsewhere onto something else." He paused, lightly shaking his head. "But this isn't the way."

Julius could only remain slumped in Pandora's hold, forced to listen to their exchange. He lacked any proper understanding of the situation, but he could clearly hear Subaru's emotions through his voice alone.

Strangely, he could feel as Pandora subtly reacted, momentarily loosening her grip at times.

"This isn't you," Subaru stated. "You know that, too. You know what we've been through together, what we've talked about. We both know what the real you is really like." He paused, taking a breath. "I know that you're in a lot of pain. I know that everything hurts. I want to help you. So, please, Dora, come back to me."

Pandora's eyes seemed to narrow even more, yet her arm wavered and her grasp on Julius further loosened. Her arm started to shake, her teeth gritting while her head quickly turned to the side. Her body shook for a moment, her eyes clenching themselves shut.

The arm that held Julius swung itself outward, letting go of the knight and sending him flying through the air. Subaru's eyes widened, taking his gaze off of Pandora in order to focus on Julius. He reacted quickly, extending his right arm and manifesting a Helping Hand, which similarly extended from underneath his arm.

The Helping Hand shot forward at an incredible speed, keeping itself directly under Julius as he came closer to the ground. When it caught him, Julius felt lost for breath, even as the hand lowered him to the ground. It gently set him down before quickly returning to Subaru, disappearing into his body.

Julius didn't have time to process it all, instinctively grabbing at his nearly crushed throat with both of his hands. He felt disoriented, his eyes scanning the area for a moment, trying to get a grasp on where exactly he was.

"Julius! Get out of here!" Subaru yelled out to him, his tone harsh and demanding. Julius had rarely ever heard him speak in such a way.

Julius wished to argue. Once he saw Subaru's face, however, that thought drifted away. His friend's expression was stern, yet also soft and filled with pure, unbridled emotion. He looked over to Pandora. She remained mostly stationary, but, by looking at her face, Julius could tell that there were deep, underlying emotions in her, as well..

Julius knew that he was too far in over his head. He stood no chance against Pandora in combat, that much was painfully evident. From the look of things now, Subaru knew what he was doing. Julius didn't know why, or even how, but he confidently felt as though Subaru would be able to handle the situation from here.

The best thing for Julius to do now was get out of the way.

He picked himself up off of the ground, hardly able to get to his feet. He still felt weary, almost wobbling in his steps. He made sure to pick up his fallen sword, which had been kicked away, fumbling to sheath it before he started to move back.

Julius spared one last glance at Subaru. The knight's curiosity ran wildly, but he contained it. His questions would be better off wondered about later. For now, he needed to report back to Felt.

And so, Julius left.

Subaru and Pandora were left alone. They were free to indulge in their quarrel without interruption.

Subaru took a deep breath, watching as Pandora did the same. He kept his arms up and steady, slowly trying to approach her, despite her eyes not being on him. His own gaze wandered downward, shivering at the sight of three dead bodies on the ground: a family of three, each killed with their own brutality. Their blood was still fresh, and he knew that Pandora was the one responsible.

Denial crept up into his mind. He *knew* that Pandora — the Pandora that he knew — wasn't really like this.

He thought back to their time together. He remembered them fondly. Sure, things may have started out rough, but in the end it became how it was now. He wouldn't trade that in for anything.

He remembered when they had first started opening up to one another in the Seal.

He remembered when she had first shared her past with him. It was the first time she'd truly displayed her vulnerability to him. It showed that she had trusted him.

He remembered how much closer they'd grown and their confessions of love.

He remembered that, even after being released, they had remained close. Pandora hadn't reverted back to her previous mindset. She'd stayed with him, caring and loving; a sweet and normal girl. That's how Subaru viewed it, at least.

He remembered their talks of the future. They had a plan to settle down, to start a family.

... His mind wandered to the family of three, freshly dead on the ground. He couldn't help but draw parallels to their own plan for a family. Pandora had been the one to kill them, so—

He rapidly shook his head. He shouldn't dwell on thoughts like that. The Pandora he knew — the Pandora he had grown close to — wouldn't kill an innocent family like that. Right now, she wasn't in her right mind.

Subaru narrowed his eyes again, determined. He would bring her back. He'd save her.

So far, his attempts to reach out to her through Cor Leonis had failed. He, however, would not give up hope so soon. Perhaps if he got close enough, he could use Natural State on her, restoring her mind.

The sword at his back rattled a bit. He internally grimaced at the reminder. If he could help it, he would never have to use it.

At the same time, Pandora was having her own internal, mental breakdown. Her mind raced, rapidly debating with itself with an influx of denial and uncertainty.

Is it him ...? Is he back—?

No, it cannot be.

But he is standing right there—

That cannot be true. That is impossible.

He called out to me. He is back. He is waiting for me—

A fake. A trick. An illusion.

I cannot leave him—

He left me. I saw it. He is dead.

...

Pandora suddenly ceased any and all movement, making Subaru do the same. She remained unmoving, entirely still where she stood. Subaru stayed silent, yet he kept his hopes up. He thought that maybe, just maybe, he'd gotten through to her. Maybe she'd come back.

Those hopes were dashed in an instant.

Her face scrunched, visibly showing an intense anger and frustration. Compared to how she was before, the sudden show of emotions was a terrifying shift.

Her head shot toward Subaru, her eyes making fierce contact with him and making him flinch with an instinctive fear. Her expression alone caused a chill to run down his spine.

He momentarily wondered if his feelings had something to do with her Authority. Though, perhaps it truly scared him to see his beloved so heated, so broken.

She was angry, and her face showed it. Her teeth were grit into a nasty snarl, her hands were enclosed into tight fists, and her eyes were narrowed into a deep glare that bore into his very soul.

Subaru stiffened. He could only watch as she picked up a piece of the fallen statue at her side with a single hand, hurling it at him without missing a beat.

Subaru moved quickly, protruding two Helping Hands from each side of his back and positioning all four of them in front of him to act as a shield. The broken piece of statue slammed into the Hands, creating enough force to physically push Subaru back. His shoes skid across the ground, coming to a stop only a few meters from where he once stood.

He lowered the hands down to his sides, thinking it was over. His eyes went to look at the thrown piece of statue, which had thumped onto the ground and kicked up some dirt after the impact. The dirt barely obstructed his vision, but it hardly mattered anyway.

His Danger Sense immediately went off. His eyes shot forward, barely catching the sight of his own stone-made face barreling straight for him. Moving instinctively without thinking, he jumped to the side in order to dodge it.

The rather large stone head of himself shot past him, hitting the ground and tumbling at high speeds directly into a building. When Subaru heard screams from inside, he gasped and quickly ran toward it, leaving Pandora alone behind him. She remained in her place, her eyes intently watching him as he moved.

He made it to the building, using his four Helping Hands to lift and move rubble. Underneath it lay two women, covered in dust and debris on the now broken floor. Subaru did his best to quickly help them, removing as much rubble out of the way as he could.

The two women, luckily, seemed to be relatively uninjured, only dazed and disoriented. They weren't hit directly by the stone, nor had they been directly struck by anything too heavy or hazardous. Subaru quickly helped them to their feet and got them moving, ushering them away to safety, which they gratefully accepted and followed.

Before Subaru exited the broken remains of the building, he paused and looked to his broken, stone head. It sat at rest in the middle of the building, its momentum having been stopped by the walls. Subaru stared at it, and its stone, cold, and unchanging face stared back.

The expression the stone head held was one that resonated with him. Subaru looked directly into his own, cheerful smile. Oh, how he wished that he could so easily smile like that right now.

Things stayed quiet for what felt like minutes.

Though, after just a few moments, Subaru's eyes softened, looking away as he climbed out of the building, his broken, stone head watching him as he left. He looked ahead at Pandora, who remained in place, continuing to observe him.

Subaru raised his arms outward, as if gesturing around the area, but at nothing in particular. "Is this really what you want?" he asked, slightly heated compared to how he'd spoken to her before. "Do you really want to hurt me? To hurt these people?"

Her face twitched again, contorting with mixed emotions.

Subaru felt something within him flare up. He knew what it was, but, strangely, it felt different. Instead of a helping hand, an aiding aura, a healing touch, or an instinctive intuition, it was something more special; it was something more akin to him as a person.

This power, whatever it was, centered itself around his very soul. It metaphorically wrapped entirely around him, adapting to his very being. It's abilities tugged at his mind, letting him know that they were there, ready to be used at his will.

As Subaru felt the familiar tingle from Danger Sense, he narrowed his eyes and acted.

Pandora appeared in front of him, her expression stern with a clear frustration and anger. She thrust her arm forward, straight into his chest.

... Except it didn't hit anything.

Her arm went through his chest, but it failed to pierce any skin. Instead, it seemed to phase right through it. Subaru's body still stood in place, nothing visually changed, but it was almost transparent-like in nature.

"I guess I was wrong, then?" a familiar voice sounded from beside her. Pandora's eyes widened, her head shooting toward the source, finding Subaru standing there, arms crossed with a downcast expression. "You really do want to kill me?"

She appeared in front of him again, performing the same move. It only yielded the same result.

"I guess so, huh," he spoke again, this time from behind her.

She turned to look at him, getting an immediate eyeful of his saddened face once again. There were three of him now, and each of them looked at her like she had just died.

Still, he remained hopeful. He showed it in his tone as he spoke, "Please, Dora, come back to me. I don't want to fight you."

Pandora tried again.

Then, again.

Then ... again.

Each and every time, the same things would happen. Every time she tried to kill one, it would fail and another would appear. They each bore his image, but they weren't real. They were only manifestations of his image. They were fakes; illusions.

... It was similar to the person she was fighting, right? He wasn't Subaru. It was just an imposter that stole his face and image.

Yes, that was it.

That made her angry.

All of those sweet, pleading words. How dare he speak to her like that ... like he knew her. Only Subaru knew her, and this couldn't be him.

... Right?

As she kept her pace, attacking as many of the manifestations as possible, Pandora was starting to get confused. She looked around herself at all angles, only to see a different Subaru. His face was still sad and disappointed, though notably strained.

She kept both her gaze and body moving, looking everywhere in an attempt to distinguish the real Subaru. It proved fruitless.

She suddenly stopped as something grabbed at her ankles. She was barely able to look down in time to see two dark, purplish hands before they roughly yanked her back.

Her upper body flopped down, hitting the ground with a rough, hard impact. Even with her Authority, the force of the landing had left her a bit dazed. The hands never let go over her ankles, instead positioning above them in order to pin her down. Two more hands shot forward from behind, grabbing her wrists, spreading her arms to the side so that she could be pinned there, too.

Quickly after that, she felt something press against her back. While she couldn't see him in her current position, she knew that it was Subaru — the imposter. He sounded out of breath, as if he'd suddenly gotten exhausted.

Even when the daze wore off, she didn't move. She remained completely still, her eyes only blinking once, her face occasionally twitching and teeth lightly gritting.

Her mind was going haywire.

I need to stop—!

I need to keep going!

I cannot—!

I must!

I'm hurting him—!

It is not him!

It is—!

It is not! He left me! I saw it! I held his body as he died!

He is here! He is alive! He is trying to help me—!

...

The effects of her mental brawl kept her from moving, her eyes staring ahead in a daze. Every speck of her energy was spent keeping herself still, lest she kill the man at her back in an instant.

She registered nothing, only herself.

"I'll have to thank you for this power later, Dora," he mumbled, looking down at her with a thankful, yet sad, expression.

The Authority of Vainglory, and technically Pandora herself, had saved him. It gave him the advantage that he needed, but it took a toll on his stamina.

Still, with how deenergized he felt, he would only have one shot at this.

He quickly lowered his right, normal hand, lightly grabbing a hold of the back of her head. His grip wasn't tight, since he didn't want to hurt her, but it was firm enough to keep her steady. He didn't want to waste any time; he didn't know how long she'd stay down for. He needed to end this.

Subaru closed his eyes, letting the images and whispers of Natural State fill his ears. It all happened in the span of a few seconds, his mind opening up to the grid which was the inner workings of her body.

Everything was going well. The whispers gently guided him, and he felt confident in the fact that he was going to heal and stabilize her fractured mind. However, everything changed when he felt something ... different.

His eyes opened and widened, immediately withdrawing his hand far away from her head, his breaths suddenly becoming heavy. He stopped using Natural State, the whispers quieting in his ears.

Subaru brought his hands in front of his eyes. He intently looked at them, slightly fearful; however, they held a lot of regret within them, as well.

He'd almost removed Pandora's Authority. Natural State was going to heal her mind, but it would also fix everything else. His lack of control over the power showed in that moment. Subaru was scared of taking away her Authority.

He couldn't help but berate himself. He could have potentially fixed everything, but his selfishness at preserving a possible future prevented him from doing what was necessary.

How reckless and foolish of him. How slothful; how greedy, how lustful. He truly was the epitome of all sins.

He should've just done it, but he was too much of a coward. He didn't want to harm her at all. It just felt so ... wrong. It could've killed her.

But what if he failed now? He would be damning the lives of so many innocent people.

He hated himself for being so selfish. Why couldn't he just ... do it?

Pandora's body twitched under him. His Danger Sense went off, the tingling almost blaring in his head. His arm moved on its own, bending backward and grabbing hold of the hilt of his sword, drawing it out of its sheath and bringing it straight to her neck.

He barely stopped himself in time.

Danger Sense fought against him, but Subaru fought back harder. He kept his own arms from slicing Pandora's throat, shaking intensely as he fought against himself. The entire time, Subaru was horrified.

He looked at the sword, its clean, shiny blade glistening in the sunlight. The Sword of Life surprisingly felt lighter in his hands, its untapped power laying dormant within, waiting for its moment to strike.

Pandora's eyes were also locked onto the blade, which was only mere inches away from her skin. She knew of the blade; she knew what it could do to her.

The Sword of Life was one of the most powerful weapons in the world. Its ability to completely destroy an individual's soul, no matter who or what they were, was incredibly unique to the blade, and extremely deadly.

It could even permanently kill the Sword Saint. If it had hit her, Pandora wouldn't have survived, even with her Authority.

...

He'd almost *killed* her ... for good. Both Subaru and Pandora acknowledged this.

For Subaru, it was horrifying. It haunted him and made him fear his own instincts. For Pandora, it only served to fuel one emotion: anger. It surged within her, but for what reason, she wasn't sure.

Her anger flashed onto her face, her arms and legs rapidly shooting up and breaking out of their restraints with ease. She thrust her back backward, knocking him off of her and making him stumble onto his butt.

She flipped herself around so that her body faced him, bending her right leg back and delivering a devastating kick to his stomach before he could even react.

The impact made him drop the sword, knocking the wind out of him in the process and breaking a few bones. He actually went up into the air, flying and spiraling backward, straight toward a nearby building.

He still had enough awareness in his mind to react, protruding four Helping Hands from his back and quickly anchoring them to the building in order to catch his descent. The landing still hurt, but it was much better than slamming head first into a brick wall.

Subaru could already feel Natural State healing his body, barely catching his breath. He, however, had no time to think about things.

Danger Sense began going off again, but Subaru was reluctant to let his instincts take over, especially after what had just happened. He couldn't be entirely sure of what he would or wouldn't do anymore.

He didn't move.

He turned his head around, catching the sight of a broken statue arm right before it hit him. He broke through the building's wall, crashing onto the floor of its second story. He gasped for air for a few moments, but Natural State was helping him quickly recover.

He found himself able to stand, though it was hard and he wobbled a bit as he walked. In his dazed mind, he couldn't help but be surprised at the fact that the floor held together.

He made his way toward the new hole in the wall, looking down at the open area from within. His eyes immediately went to Pandora, snapping him completely out of his daze. He adopted the same expression as before, looking at her longingly, as uncertainty filled him.

Was she really gone? Was she really a lost cause? No matter what he said, nothing seemed to completely get through to her.

But ... he *was* getting through to her. Perhaps it wasn't *fully* reaching her, but it *was* reaching her.

It was as if Subaru was extending a hand out for her to take. She saw it — she acknowledged it — but would never make a move to grab it. Though, at the same time, it was like she wanted to.

At least, that's what it felt like to him.

Throughout this conflict, he'd seen her moments of hesitation and reluctance. The anger she felt now existed as a byproduct of her own confusion and sadness. For that, he knew he was to blame, but it gave him a reason not to give up.

A sense of hope once again found its way into his heart, visibly shown to the world through his now shifted expression.

He looked determined, full of pure will. He couldn't give up that hope; not yet. If he gave up, everything would have been for naught. Everyone's sacrifices would be in vain. He couldn't let that come to pass.

She could still be saved. Screw Natural State, and screw the Sword of Life. He would do it his own way. He would make things right, for everyone and for her.

Return by Death was gone. He needed to make everything count.

His Authority of Vainglory pulsed within him, after that. Subaru relinquished himself to it once again, letting it further envelop his very soul. From that, he seemed more at ease — more aware. The Authority seemed to be empowered, though from what, he wasn't quite sure. He knew that he was only scratching the surface of what it was capable of, now.

Subaru was more vigilant now, his mind better open to the things around him. He centered his sight on Pandora, who only looked back at him. He zoned out, unable to keep his mind from thinking of her.

It was as though he looked directly into her very soul. He could see her — the *real* her. She was in there, he was sure of it. He reassured himself of that fact.

Pandora seemed to react out of nowhere, springing herself into action. Danger Sense screamed at him, momentarily snapping Subaru out of his thoughts. A moderately-sized piece of stone, broken from the fallen statue, was hurling toward him at high speeds. He reacted, jumping out of the building before the stone crashed into him.

He turned himself around in midair, extending a Helping Hand from under his right arm and using it to grapple onto the building's roof. As the hand began pulling him up, Danger Sense went off again. He planted his feet onto the building's surface, halting his ascent. With one look to his right, he saw a thin metal beam which connected this building to the next.

Subaru jumped off and spun around again so that he could properly aim his left arm at the beam. A Helping Hand shot out from underneath it, grabbing hold of the beam and allowing him to swing toward it.

He swung under it, his momentum carrying him enough to circle around and land atop it. He struggled to keep his balance at first, anchoring his Helping Hands to each of his sides in order to better stabilize himself.

How could he get her to calm down? Subaru knew that his words were getting through to her, but he was starting to doubt his own capabilities. Perhaps he was only barely breaking through the surface, but he would keep trying.

He didn't have a chance to think any longer. Danger Sense erupted in his mind again, his eyes able to watch as another large piece of statue came directly for him.

Subaru turned to his left, shooting both Helping Hands at the next building's roof and using them to propel himself forward. The piece of statue missed, striking and breaking the beam he once stood on.

As he adjusted himself on the building's slanted roof, with his focused and clear mind, he affirmed his thoughts.

He began to run across the roof's surface, narrowly dodging more pieces of statue as they were thrown at him from below. A part of him was actually amazed at how accurate Pandora was when it came to throwing things.

He made a large leap from the building's roof, aiming for the next. Luckily, the next roof was shorter, making it easier for him to land. He shot his Helping Hands downward, using them to aid in his descent, preventing any injury.

As another large chunk of stone came for him, he jumped off of the roof. The stone missed, hitting the roof and falling through due to its weight. Subaru turned himself around as he fell, facing the building's wall, and used his Helping Hands to slow his descent. When his feet touched the ground, he positioned himself to face Pandora again.

While difficult, grueling even, Subaru knew that he couldn't relent. His belief in her was extraordinary, even with the impossibility of everything that was happening. He was completely unwilling to leave her alone, not again.

Even if it took days, weeks, months, or even years, he would keep trying. He owed it to not only her, but everyone else, as well.

He knew Pandora for who she truly was, and that was enough for him. He had faith in her.

Subaru's expression softened as he kept his gaze ahead of him. He watched as Pandora almost responded to his thoughts, effortlessly grabbing another large chunk of the statue with an obvious intent to hurl it at him. Unfortunately for her, she was running out of things to throw, and Subaru was starting to solidify a peace of mind.

Subaru began his advance toward the Witch in front of him, quickly coming to a halt when Pandora threw the large piece of statue in his direction. It shot through the air at incredible speeds, just like her other throws, but it failed to dissuade Subaru.

All five of his Helping Hands extended out from his back; two hands came around from each side while the final hand came from over his head. They quickly extended out in front of him, spreading their palms and acting as a shield.

The stone slammed into them. The force was enough to push Subaru back, his shoes skidding across the ground. The hands weren't destroyed, staying extended as they willfully held the stone back.

Its momentum slowed, only ceasing as the next few seconds passed. The Hands kept hold of it, moving off to the side and lowering it down to the ground. Once it was low enough, the hands released their grip, shooting back to Subaru and disappearing into his body.

Subaru wasted no time in continuing his advance. He held up a single hand, trying to induce a message of nonaggression. He walked over the sword, its blade glistening in the light, but he ignored it.

His actions did little to affect Pandora, however, as her expression hadn't changed. She was still angry, glaring at him from where she stood.

"You're angry, you're confused, I get it, I really do," Subaru began, trying his best to convey his understanding to her. "I messed up. I really, really messed up. You have every right to be angry about that. I don't blame you for that at all."

Pandora didn't seem to visually change, or, at the very least, Subaru didn't notice. That, however, didn't last long, as Pandora suddenly appeared in front of him. Her arm reeled back in a millisecond, thrusting itself forward in a devastating strike to his gut.

It never landed.

Just like before, her fist and arm ran straight through his body. Though, unlike the last time, it disappeared, fading into the wind.

She turned around, coming face-to-face with the man again, bearing the same expression and gesture as before. Pandora couldn't mistake how sympathetic and caring that expression of his was. It made her angry.

How dare he give her that look ...

"And I know that this," he paused, using his free hand to gesture to the destruction around them, "isn't something you would do anymore. I remember what you told me, all that time ago. Your home, the village ... it hurt you. You did this back then, too, and you hated yourself for it. You thought that there was no way out for yourself ..."

How dare he say such things. How dare he act like he knew her ...

"I told you before, so I'll say it again now. It's not too late for you; it wasn't then, and it isn't now." He took a breath, preparing his next words. "I know you're thinking that isn't true, but it is. I know that you think you're alone, but you're not."

Pandora's face twitched, as did her fingers. Her body rushed toward, appearing in front of him as if she'd teleported, thrusting her hand forward and aiming for his head. Just like before, it phased right through, the projection fading in the breeze.

"I don't want to fight you," he said. She didn't even bother turning around. She didn't even want to look at him. Still, even then, her mind could only focus on what he was saying. "I want to be there for you. I want to laugh with you when you're happy, and cry with you when you're sad. I want to live my life with you."

Something felt off, but she paid it no mind. Again, she dashed ahead in another assault. This time, she looked directly into his face as she did so. It was loving, knowing, and undoubtful.

Her soul rattled and shook. She felt tired, almost entirely weakened. As she swiped her arm through his chest, only for it to yield the same results, she failed to realize, or even consider, what was happening to her.

When he reappeared behind her, she chose to face him again. He failed to look deterred. Rather, with a hardened will and self-assurance, he continued to speak to her.

"I'm here for you, Dora. I always will be. I'll never, ever leave you like that again. Everything will be okay, I promise."

Pandora felt as her eyes unconsciously widened. It was then that she had some semblance of realization to what was happening to her.

Her Authority was built off of perception. Vainglory was the epitome of one's excessive pride, and the Authority was fueled by that. Her own perception and will could dictate her Authority's functionality, allowing her to force that will wherever she went, but the same could be said for other people.

Subaru — the man before her — held an entirely different view, one that completely contrasted from what her Authority hungered for. The insistence and will in his words was the exact opposite of Vainglory: pure modesty.

Pandora had held her own doubts within, even if she didn't realize it. He made her own twisted and manipulated perception subtly crack under the weight of his words, depowering her Authority's influence and enforcing her own inner conflict.

Such sentiment from his words — his expressions — really held so much meaning to her, after all.

Her expression, which had been contorted into one of anger, began to gradually soften as her mind cleared. Her eyes changed from a hardened glare to a soft sadness. Her face switched back and forth between expressions as her anger fought back.

She felt weak, drained of energy. Her mind raced once more.

Do not be fooled!

This is real—

He is lying!

He is telling the truth—

He will only end up leaving again.

Pandora snapped out of her inner thoughts, her eyes focusing back on Subaru, who now stood directly in front of her. She hadn't even noticed that she'd fallen to her knees, nor did she notice the tears which began to roll down her cheeks.

Subaru smiled at her, extending his right hand for her to take. She was shocked to see such a gesture.

Her mind tempted her, urging her to take it, but her arm wouldn't budge. Her doubts were strong enough to dissuade the action.

"Please, come home to me, Dora."

Her eyes widened. His voice was calm, sweet, loving, and encouraging. Just hearing him speak in such a way made her lack of energy meaningless to her. Her arm moved instantly, her hand quickly grabbing a hold of his.

When Subaru began to pull her up, she could hardly hold herself back from falling straight into him. Pandora's arms wrapped around his back, her face digging into the crook of his neck. She could feel his arms returning the gesture.

From the moment they made contact with each other, their souls felt calmer, more at peace. Little by little, their respective anxieties trickled away as they held each other close.

"It's okay, I'm here."

Her mind began to ease. Her thoughts were no longer diluted, now solidified.

This was real.

She wasn't alone.

He was here.

...

It was then that she felt assured, safe in his arms.

She lightly continued to cry, holding him tightly, as though he'd disappear the second she let go. He rubbed circles around her back, trying to soothe her. She didn't care about her own perception or how she was viewed, she felt free; free to let out all of her feelings to him.

Her distress remained prominent, her eyes staying open, unable to pry away from the carnage around them. Pandora knew that this was just a small, minuscule amount of what she had done.

"I ..." She tried to speak, but her words came up dry. Subaru seemed to hold her more securely, bringing himself as close to her as possible.

"It's okay, it's okay," he repeated, continuing in his soothing motions. "I'm here for you."

Through her tears, she finally closed her eyes, digging her face into the crook of his neck. For the first time since everything started, she spoke, "I ... I am sorry. I am so sorry."

Subaru developed a downcast expression at Pandora's soft pleas. He lightly bright a hand up her back, moving his palm around the back of her head so that he could hold her closer.

Despite their current position, Subaru activated Cor Leonis: Third Shift. The two felt connected to one another again as their souls intertwined.

While Pandora took heavy breaths, Subaru spoke in a calm, reassuring tone, "You'll be okay. It's okay."

He could feel Pandora shake her head into his shoulder. "It is not," she mumbled. "I cannot undo the damage that I have done."

Subaru silently noted how much she'd changed. Just moments ago, she'd been an angry, murderous Witch. Before that, she was an emotionless husk of what he knew, killing anything in her path. Now, she was neither.

She was simply Pandora.

Cor Leonis: Third Shift allowed him to understand and feel that change, but this was special. She openly showed her feelings; she openly showed her regret and sadness to him in full.

Pandora wanted to fix everything, but she knew that she couldn't. Half of her power was gone. Undoing something of such a large scale just wasn't totally plausible anymore.

Subaru knew better than to let himself believe the same, though. He still held hope.

"You can, Dora. I really believe that you can."

He could feel Pandora's surprise at the statement. In response, she took another deep breath, speaking in a light, doubtful tone, "How?"

"Because I'm here. We can do it together."

It was then that Pandora felt it: various foreign powers, along with a very familiar one, gracing her soul. She understood what he meant, now.

Cor Leonis: Third Shift didn't just let them share their feelings, inner and physical; it let them share *everything*.

That included the things which envelopes around their very souls: Witch Factors — the antithesis to the Od Laguna itself.

Pandora felt the other half of her Witch Factor return, reconnecting with her own. Her Authority was made whole again.

Through the small streams of tears, she closed her eyes, silently thanking Subaru for the opportunity she now had. She took hold of her Authority and began to use it, willing everything to be undone — to undo her mistakes.

... It really wasn't too late.

Subaru could feel her resolve through their connection. He felt himself becoming relieved, even happy. Things would return to the way they were supposed to be. Everything would be fixed. Everyone would come back.

...

Pandora suddenly went limp in his arms. Her legs gave out on her, so he quickly moved himself to catch her. He carefully held her up, immediately looking at her face. Pandora's eyes were closed, her expression indistinguishable.

Her breathing light, though she was unmoving and unresponsive. She was out cold.

He could feel that something was wrong through Cor Leonis, but he couldn't distinguish what it was. He couldn't understand it. All he could feel was a strain, as well as a certain emptiness that he couldn't even begin to describe.

Subaru picked up his gaze, quickly moving his head to look around the area. The statue was still broken, the buildings were still in shambles, and there were still lifeless, bloody bodies lying on the ground.

Nothing had changed.

His flames of hopes were stomped out in an instant, replaced by a terrifying and unyielding dread.

He carefully redirected his gaze back down to Pandora. He could only distinguish her consistently light breathing, causing him to worry further. Subaru's heart started to beat faster and faster as his unease rose.

It was too late.

There was nothing else he could do.

They needed to leave.

Subaru rose to his feet, holding Pandora up with both of his arms. He saw the glistening of his sword once more, setting Pandora down only to quickly put it back in its sheath. He raised her in his arms again, his hold caring and secure.

He looked in a few different directions before choosing one, quickly and carefully rushing off. With that, the two disappeared, leaving that area firmly behind them.

The entire time, however, they were unaware of a certain pair of eyes which peered at them from the shadows.

***Chapter 16*: Identity**

Ah, Sealed, it's good to be back. This chapter was a bit of a pain to write, to be sure, but I had a fun time overall. Thank you to everyone that's been patiently waiting all of this time!

That being said, I hope you all enjoy this chapter! It's nothing extravagant, but I think it carries some good moments!

Lugnican Royal Knights ran down the road in unorganized groups. They yelled and shouted, spouting orders, commands, and any kind of situation update to each other constantly.

The Capital had just been dealt an incredibly lethal blow. It was comparable to someone taking a knife and using it to cut at their skin. It left an open, gaping wound. A vulnerability.

The knights would pass more than once in each hour. They were always hurried and loud, doing their best to get from place to place as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Every time they went by, Subaru felt himself tense. He became nervous, fearful even, as he watched from the second story window of an empty building.

He understood why the knights were so active and paranoid. They were scrambling to do damage control. People had died, so they were doing their best to save who they could. Some of the victims were people who Subaru knew personally.

His look suddenly became somber.

... He would never get them back.

Subaru rapidly shook his head. He couldn't think like that right now. The situation was dire for everyone, and he knew it.

His thoughts prompted him to turn around. Pandora sat on the floor not too far away, her back pressed against the wall as she curled herself into a ball. After she passed out, he had brought her to this place, where they'd taken refuge for nearly a day now.

Subaru's gaze softened as he looked at her, feeling a sense of guilt. They hadn't spoken a single word to one another yet. The only communication that they shared was through their feelings.

Pandora's feelings weighed down heavily upon herself. Subaru could feel it through his Authority, but he wasn't sure of what he should do. He wanted to go to her, comfort her, but something in the back of his mind told him to wait.

It actually sounded like her voice. It was as though Pandora herself was telling him to give her some space.

So, he did. For many, many hours, he just let her be.

Unfortunately for him, most of his time was spent worrying. Worrying about whether they'd be found, worrying about his friends, worrying about *her*.

Everything served as a reminder to him. A reminder of his own failings and mistakes.

Everything came back to him. If he hadn't attempted to so recklessly kill himself, then none of this would've happened. Pandora would've never gone berserk and so many people would still be alive.

He had been the catalyst. The spark which lit the flame.

At the time, he believed that he should have taken the chance. He believed that, if he went back, everyone could have been saved, and that everyone could have been happy.

But Return by Death was gone. It was all in vain.

He took a risk and, as a result, he had left the woman that he loves behind. He had broken their promise in favor of a chance that he never truly had. That fact *haunted* him.

As the hours passed, Subaru's mind constantly replayed those thoughts in order to pass the time.

Pandora hadn't moved at all. Not even a muscle. As more time passed, Subaru began to get increasingly more concerned. Should he say something, or should he keep giving her some space?

In the end, he took a deep breath. He stood up from where he sat and walked over to where she was. He kept standing, leaning his back up against the wall opposite of her. She still didn't move.

Subaru looked forward, doing his best to try and find *something* to say. After a moment, he awkwardly coughed and rambled, "Are ... Are you okay?"

He wanted to smack his head against the wall so hard, his skull would shatter and break. What kind of a question was that? *Of course*, she wasn't okay!

"U-Uh, I mean—"

"Subaru, stop."

He shut up immediately. He could feel his entire body tense. Her voice was cold, almost dead, when she spoke. However, it didn't hold any kind of annoyance, frustration, or anger. It was just ... blank.

From there, silence ensued. Neither spoke or did anything for several, long minutes. Any sound that could be heard came from the shuffling knights outside.

"Why?"

Subaru suddenly froze. He'd heard her question loud and clear, despite how quiet it sounded. His mind wracked at it, unable to fully grasp what she'd just said.

"W-What?"

"I said, why?!"

She finally moved, bringing herself to her feet in an instant. She got close to him, right in his face, her expression just as agitated as the tone she spoke in.

"Tell me why," she said again. "I do not understand why!"

Subaru's lips parted, but no words came out. The fact that she was beginning to raise her voice was surprising to him. It was unlike her to do that, but it seemed as though this situation was a special one.

Yet, it still didn't take long for him to understand what was going on. Pandora had been silent for such a long time. Whatever this was, she must have been thinking about it for a long while now.

His expression softened at that realization. She noticed, causing her own expression to become more frustrated than it already was.

"Tell me why you are so persistent! Why did you try to save me? Why do you try to help me? Why do you insist on being by my side? Why have you not just left me already?!"

Despite how surprised he still was, his expression remained the same. Pandora had never been this emotional, this expressive, before. Her whole demeanor and voice was filled with a broken passion.

"I cannot understand it," she muttered, shaking her head whilst looking down at her hands. "I am a Witch. I am a monster. I have killed without a shred of mercy. Just look at me."

Subaru did look at her. The outfit that they'd picked out together was covered in blood, completely ruined. He was confident that the blood which stained her clothes was mixed with more than just a few dozen people's.

It horrified him, yet he still looked back into her eyes with a straight face. She met his gaze with her own, but that was all.

"Tell me. What is the reason? What is the reason for this ... this foolishness!"

"It's because I know who you are."

Pandora grimaced, not having expected the instant response. Her mind easily grasped what he said, but she forced herself to deny it.

Sensing this, Subaru continued, "We were stuck together for a literal eternity. I like to think that I know you better than anyone."

"Are you blind?" she asked him, suddenly becoming defensive. "Did you not see what I have done? There is an insurmountable amount of blood on my hands. It cannot be undone. You had the sword to my neck. You could have finally ended me."

"I would never do that," he said with conviction.

"That is what I do not understand!"

"Dora ..." he trailed off, moving himself closer. He felt a strong conviction to comfort her, to calm her down, so he opened his arms and moved to try giving her a hug.

SMACK!

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

One of Subaru's arms was knocked away, the loud sound echoing throughout the room. Then, silence hung throughout the room, only interrupted by their heavy breathing.

Realization set in fast.

Pandora's eyes widened, as did Subaru's. His hand moved on its own, gently rubbing against the new red spot on his arm.

The anger had since left Pandora's expression, her mouth slightly agape. Her face scrunched in on itself, her hands clenching in on themselves. Her head tilted downward, trying to avoid him with her eyes.

With a reserved and quiet voice, she spoke, "Tell me, Subaru ... Tell me why you did not kill me. Why did you not end my life?"

Subaru took a deep breath, doing his best to compose himself after what just happened. "You already know the answer to that."

"... Just tell me."

"I ... I shouldn't be the one to tell you," he said. "You should figure it out on your own."

Pandora went silent, after that, only to take a breath. It didn't take long for her to find the answer. Her mouth opened, only three words quietly leaving her lips, "You love me."

"I do."

She went silent again, her expression softening after hearing his voice. It sounded so resolved, so sure of itself, yet also soft and reassuring. Her heart pounded against her chest, trying to escape a void that constantly attempted to consume it.

She was wholly undeserving of his love and care. She knew that. Despite her reciprocated love for him, she knew that she didn't deserve it because of who she was. Because of who she still *is*.

"Why?"

"Dora ... You already know why."

She could really hear the emotions in his voice. It was gentle, kind, caring ... hopeful.

"... I am not the girl that you believe that I am," she countered. "I am a Witch."

"Really?" he questioned back, his voice shifting to carry obvious skepticism. "So you're saying that you're the same person that just tore the city apart, right?"

"Yes. I share the same body, the same face ... the same power."

"But does that really make you, you? Think about it, Dora."

She grimaced at the use of her nickname. Her mind wandered back to their time together within the Seal of Eternity, where a very similar conversation took place. This, however, was a very different circumstance. To that, there was no doubt in her mind.

"I have already given it substantial thought. Who I am is clear enough."

"Is it? Because, right now, I see Pandora. A girl who's scared, worried, guilty, sad, and lonely. You want someone to be there for you, but you're afraid of yourself. You don't trust yourself, so how could others trust you, right?"

Pandora didn't speak again. How could she, after he'd seen right through her? After hearing it aloud, she could no longer hide behind forced denial.

Subaru was nearly saying the same things as he did before, yet it still did so much to sway her resolve.

She suddenly felt a pair of arms slither their way around her. She stiffened at the sudden contact, bracing herself. A part of her expected to lose control, to lash out and attack, but it never happened.

Pandora could hear Subaru's voice, just as comforting and reassuring as before, "I'm sorry that I left you before. I was stupid and selfish and I wasn't thinking straight. I ... I didn't think about you, and I regret that so, so much."

Her body began to subtly shake as she spoke. She could feel something building up behind her eyes, though she tried her hardest to resist it.

"I was an idiot before. I know that you're angry with me, and I know you're upset. You have every right to feel that way," he continued. "Even though you were there for me, I wasn't there for you. I was selfish and too focused on myself to notice that you needed me. That's a mistake that I'll never make again."

She began to shake a little more, her body stiffening to try and keep even a remnant of composure.

"I know that you're conflicted right now. I know that you're feeling guilty, and I know that you're sad," he said, holding her just a little tighter. "I'm here for you. If you need to vent, I'll lend you my ear. If you need to cry, I'll lend you my shoulder. You don't have to suffer in silence anymore."

...

The floodgates finally opened.

She whipped around in his arms, burying her face into his shoulder. As tears finally escaped from her eyes, she tightly returned his embrace. Subaru, although momentarily taken aback, quickly began to run circles along her backside, comforting her to the best of his ability.

When Pandora had cried for the first time, she had been alone. Now, when Pandora cried for the second time, she was with the person that she loved, secure in his embrace.

"You're not alone anymore, Dora. You never will be again. I promise."

His words struck a chord with her. Her heart beat rapidly against her chest, her mind only able to continuously repeat those words. Though he'd said something very similar in the past, it felt much different to hear again now.

The two of them had been blinded by their respective feelings. It had nearly completely torn them both apart. That was why, even with his reassurance, she took up his offer to vent:

"Why ..." she trailed off with a quiet voice, her grip ever so slightly tightening around him. "You first promised me that you would not leave me alone, and yet ... you killed yourself. You ... You died. You left me. Why ... Why would you do that?"

Overwhelming guilt flooded Subaru in that moment. Those were things that he could hardly blame Pandora for asking. In truth, he fully blamed himself.

After all, he had done something that he never should have done.

Had he not been so idiotic, so blind to what was right in front of him, this whole mess could have been avoided. Pandora would not be in this situation, and Lugnica would not be in a crisis.

"I ... I wanted to save everyone, but it's gone," he quietly mustered. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

His grip became a little tighter as she spoke, and her eyes widened with deep realization. In an instant, Pandora understood what he meant. In response, she only somberly reciprocated his tight embrace.

No other word was spoken for a while. The two only stood there, passionately embracing one another as Pandora continued to cry into his shoulder. They let their feelings speak for themselves.

Subaru understood how Pandora felt, and she understood how he felt in turn. That was just how deep their bond went, with neither of them being eager to let that bond fall apart. Not now, not ever.

That was why this situation broke both of their hearts. They don't want to fight with one another, they don't want to start a conflict. They just wanted peace, both with the world and each other.

Eventually, the two separated. Pandora finally began to compose herself again, her tears beginning to subside as she looked at him in the eyes. He looked back, mesmerized by the color of deep ocean blue.

His mind was stuck on her. He thought back to how she'd acted moments ago. He had never seen her so emotionally charged before. In a way, he was happy that she was opening up, but, at the same time, deeply saddened by the fact that it had to happen in this way.

"What will we do?"

She spoke first, her arms beginning to loosen around his back. Subaru's gaze drifted a bit, as did his mind. The whole situation seemed so dire and bleak that he was largely unsure of what to do next.

Things would be extremely difficult for Pandora moving forward. That was a fact that could not be ignored. She would be forever scorned by the people of Lugnica and the world. She would never be able to show her face again.

A legacy akin to that of the Witch of Envy awaited her.

"Dora, they'll be after you for a long time. I—"

"I do not care," she interrupted, taking him back. She narrowed her eyes, looking at him with stern passion and purpose. "I do not care what trials lay before me. I just do not want you to have your life ruined along with mine. Please, Baru, just leave me."

Subaru was shocked by her words. He couldn't even begin to wrap his head around what she was trying to suggest. It just seemed so outrageously ridiculous and absurd to him.

After a moment, however, instead of lashing out or getting defensive, he gave her a small smile. "Not happening in another billion years, Dora."

Her eyes widened for a split second, only to narrow with a desperate defensiveness. "If you choose to stay with me, your life will only become worse. You will be hunted by the world, known only as the man that saved the Witch of Vainglory. The man that protected the Witch of Vainglory from the justice she deserved."

"Even if that's what'll happen to me, I don't care," he told her without an ounce of hesitation. "And I didn't save a Witch. I saved a girl that just wants to be like everyone else."

Pandora didn't respond to that. She couldn't find the words to even try. Subaru's sentiments pierced through her, straight to her heart. His words were all a part of an idea that she wanted to deny.

Subaru had always said something about how she was her own person. "*Pandora and the Witch of Vainglory aren't the same*," he'd say.

But this whole situation proved him wrong, didn't it?

He couldn't be right. If she wasn't the Witch of Vainglory, then who was she, really?

The truth was: she didn't know. If Pandora was her own person, then she had no idea who "Pandora" really was. But that didn't matter. She could only ever see herself as the Witch of Vainglory, anyway.

She was dangerous.

Something needed to be done about her.

Pandora looked resolved, all of a sudden. She looked at Subaru with stern eyes, the seriousness in her expression more than apparent. It took Subaru aback, a large part

of him beginning to worry about what was on her mind.

Her lips parted but, instead of speaking, she chose to take a breath. It seemed as though she needed to prepare herself, and Subaru was more than understanding of that.

"Will you promise me one thing?"

Subaru was surprised by the question. "Well ... I think it depends on what it is. Can you tell me first?"

"No. I must be sure that you will accept."

Subaru was worried. Dread overwhelmed him. He was *scared* of what she was going to suggest. He had a bad feeling about this, but, as he looked at her face, he could only see her desperation and hope.

Despite that, he felt as though he couldn't say no; not when this meant so much to her. So, he took a breath, just as she did, and relented, "Alright. I will."

With his confirmation, she looked straight into his eyes. When he looked back, Subaru saw an insurmountable amount of passion and sadness. Her lips then parted, her tone heavy as she spoke:

"If I ever lose myself again ... I want you to kill me. Do not linger; do not hesitate. The Witch of Vainglory cannot be allowed to live. Promise me that you will kill me. Promise me that you will use that sword to destroy me."

Subaru was shaken to the core. He'd almost stumbled back, despite not having been dealt a physical blow. What Pandora was asking of him ... it was too much. It was something that he couldn't handle, not now, not ever.

He's just gotten her back, and now she was asking him to kill her?

"Are you serious? You can't ask that— I can't lose you—"

"Promise."

He flinched at her tone. He wanted to convey how unreasonable this promise was, but she wasn't having it. She had already made up her mind.

Now he understood why Pandors wanted him to agree first, before making the request. He had been an idiot again, but, this time, he wanted to make things right. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

"Dora ..." he trailed off. "I can't do that. I ... I just can't."

She became defensive, or even belligerent, as her expression shifted into one of clear agitation. "Why not? You *told* me that you would agree."

"I know what I said," Subaru acknowledged. "But I can't agree to this, and I never will. I stand by what I said before."

"Then tell me why! Tell me why you will not do this. Do you not care for the world?! Do you not care about yourself?! Do you not care about *me*?!"

"I *do* care about you, which is exactly why I'm not agreeing to this!" Subaru countered, raising his voice. "I know that I'm selfish, but I also know that you don't want this just as much as I do, despite how much you're trying to hide it! Stop trying to act all noble about this, because we both know that's not why you're saying all of this crap!"

"Oh? Do you not like that I am trying to change myself? My mistake, I was not aware that you preferred the Witch of Vainglory's personality."

"Now you're just trying to be pessimistic! You're putting words in my mouth, too! That isn't what I meant and you know it! I'm talking about this ... this forced ploy of emotions from you. You're not being *yourself*!"

She finally paused. As Subaru's words played back in her mind, her expression softened, as did her posture.

Subaru took a breath, shaking his head. "Before this, I'd argue with you about this. I'd deny it with every fiber of my being and do my best to convince you." He let out a small laugh. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Her eyes shakily looked over him. She was worried, confused by how he spoke his words, as well as his change in demeanor.

Why was he talking in the past tense?

"What you did was undeniable, Dora," he said, his face solemn. He looked at her, his eyes gazing deep into her very being. "But I only ever want you to be yourself. I want you to be ... *you*. No matter how you view yourself, I'll accept you. I just don't want you to force yourself to be anything else."

This time, it was Pandora that took a breath. It was deep and drawn out, done to try and steady her rapidly beating heart. She gazed downward, looking at the backs of her hands, then flipping them to look at her palms.

"I do nothing but release the ills of humanity upon the world," she muttered. "I am the embodiment of sin, nothing more than a monster."

Silence enveloped the room for a moment. Pandora's words existed as a phantom echo in their heads, weighing down on them both. Subaru slightly nodded his head up and down, like he was accepting it.

"If that's who you think you really are, then fine. I accept you."

Her eyes snapped to him in an instant. Her lips parted, a staggered breath funneling through. "What— What are you talking about—?"

"I don't want to force you to be someone you don't want to be. I just want you to be yourself," he told her, taking a breath. "If 'yourself' happens to be a monster, then so be it."

Pandora was taken aback. Words fumbled from her mouth, her mind in disarray, "You — You cannot do that ... It is asinine! Your life will be ruined! This kingdom will come after you! You—"

"Then let's run."

Subaru stepped closer to her, grabbing both of her hands and holding them together in front of them. The warmth of his touch was comforting, but it did little to ease how Pandora truly felt.

"If that's what'll happen, then I'll take your hand and we'll run away," he said with conviction. "We'll go somewhere far away, someplace isolated where we can just be together. We can live peacefully."

She was stunned. Her eyes drifted away, unable to look at him. "What ... What about everyone here? Your friends ... everyone that is here relying on you?"

Subaru didn't respond right away. Instead, he took a moment to himself. It was clear that he needed it.

"I told you before that I wouldn't make the same mistake again," he said. He never took his eyes off of her as she continued, "And I won't. Never again, Dora. Never again."

She slowly glanced up at him, looking into his eyes. It was all too clear that he wasn't going to leave her. It didn't matter how much she wanted him to; he wouldn't budge.

He would leave everyone else behind if it meant staying with her.

Even now, after everything, he was choosing her.

Pandora couldn't understand it. It didn't make sense.

Her gaze drifted downward once more. Her mind raced with only one question, spoken in a shaken voice, "Why?"

"Because I love you."

...

She couldn't understand, but, at the same time, she did.

Pandora couldn't understand many things. Emotions and feelings that were normal to people existed only as a rarity to her. By all accounts, she was nothing close to being human.

She only understood one thing all too well, and that was Subaru.

She understood how he thought, how he felt, and how he acted. In return, he also came to understand her in the same aspects. Through him, Pandora saw doors open up. Through him, she was able to experience and understand love.

So, when Subaru said that he loved her, everything became so much clearer to her. But she knew that wasn't everything.

Her mind wandered back to their confrontation in the city. She was flat on her back, the Sword of Life mere centimeters away from slicing through her neck. It would have killed her, ending the nightmare for good, but it was stopped.

The sword was held by the man that she loved. She remembered looking up into his eyes, only for them to stare right back into hers. She remembered his expression changing, becoming forlorn and sad.

Then, he tossed the sword away.

She was at his mercy, and he gave it to her. She was nothing more than a murderous Witch, irredeemable even in her own eyes, yet he still spared her. He had approached her and calmed her down. Subaru had appealed to her humanity ... A side that she didn't even believe that she had.

... Why?

"Back then ..." she whispered. "When you looked into my eyes ... what did you see?"

"... You." He paused. "I saw you."

...

It was then that Pandora truly thought about what she was. Or, rather, *who* she was.

It didn't take long for realization to flood her mind and soul.

...

What kind of monster had humanity?

What kind of monster cared?

What kind of monster showed compassion?

What kind of monster cried?

What kind of monster could love someone?

...

Pandora was *not* a monster.

The Witch of Vainglory was, but Pandora, herself?

She would never be normal, but she never wanted to be the Witch of Vainglory, either.

Pandora just wanted to be herself. A mix, or rather a blend, of both worlds.

That was all that she needed to be.

"I understand," she mumbled, raising her gaze to meet his. Her expression shifted, her voice raising as she repeated, "I understand!"

She took a breath, steeling herself.

"I understand who I want to be."

Subaru was amazed, but, at the same time, he was incredibly proud. How could he not be? Pandora had made a monumental realization for herself, all on her own.

He couldn't help but tighten his hold on her hands. It garnered her attention, prompting her to give him a worried look.

"Tell me, Dora ... Do you love yourself?"

She didn't answer right away, though she already knew the answer. "... I do not."

Subaru's expression softened. "But you want to, right? You want to love yourself, but you don't know how, or where to start."

Pandora only responded with small nods of her head. Subaru knew how she felt more than anyone. After all, he shared the exact same problem.

"You want to have your own identity, a new sense of self," he said, developing a small smile. "I believe you can do it. I'll be there for you every step of the way, just like you always were for me. When you reach your goal, I'm sure that you'll come to love yourself in no time."

At his words, her lips curved themselves into their own shaky smile. He had swayed her heart yet again. "Thank you."

Her words were filled with genuine heartfelt appreciation, but also conviction. She could see what was hidden behind his eyes, deep within his heart and being. He was scared of himself, too.

"Say, Baru?"

"Yeah, Dora?"

"Can you promise me one thing?"

Unlike last time, he felt happy. Instead of dreading what she would say, he felt great anticipation. For some reason, he had a good feeling about this.

He nodded at her. "Of course."

Her smile began just a bit bigger. "Promise me that we will do it together."

At that, Subaru couldn't help but let out a light, heartfelt chuckle. With a low voice, he asked, "Am I really that obvious?"

"We both are, Baru," she said amusedly. "No matter what challenges we may face ahead of us, promise me that we will overcome them together."

Just as he'd seen through her, she'd seen through him right back. She didn't want him to be alone, either. She would be there for him, just as he promised to be there for her.

Subaru nodded, ever-so-slightly tightening his grip on her hands. "I promise."

No more words needed to be exchanged, after that. They pulled themselves closer, spreading their arms and embracing each other in a heartfelt embrace. It felt warm, comforting and free. Neither wanted to let go.

They both shared the exact same feelings. It wasn't just love, but an abundance of care and faith. They truly believed in one another.

So, perhaps they should start believing in themselves, too.

Pandora gave herself a lot of thought. In all honesty, she wasn't sure of what she should do. She wanted to try *something* but she was stuck on trying to figure out what that "something" could be.

Her mind drifted to the Witch of Vainglory herself. By all accounts, this entity was a part of her and always would be. Just by looking at her own face, Pandora was reminded of that identity.

Subaru helped her realize that she should just try to be herself. If she didn't like something, then do something about it. Do what feels right to *her* and her alone.

Take an initiative, make a *change* to reflect who she really wants to be, as Subaru would probably say.

And so, an idea made itself known in her mind.

Her arms slowly began to detach themselves from around his back. She began to pull away, dragging her arms along his sides all the way back. She didn't want to let go, but she had a goal in mind that she wanted to achieve.

He worriedly looked at her, only for her to look back with a strong conviction. They wordlessly communicated to each other, after which Subaru finally let go.

Pandora's legs moved on their own, taking her out of the room, and Subaru watched her go, a small smile resting on his face. He had faith in her, just as she always had faith in him.

He had a feeling that she would do something good for herself.

She sat down on a piece of old, worn out furniture. The room was relatively empty, leaving her with only herself and her thoughts.

So, she just sat there and thought.

...

What should she do next? How should she even go about approaching it?

Her thoughts wandered to Subaru. Even if he wasn't perfect and didn't quite love himself just yet, he was still an amazing person.

In reality, she knew that she couldn't even begin to compare to that.

Still, she thought about what was stopping her. She asked herself more questions, wondering what was holding her back.

The answer was already quite clear to her. It was herself. She held herself back.

Her mind wandered back to their time in the seal, as well as their time outside of it. She thought about everything that Subaru told her.

Over the course of his stay in this world, he went through many perilous trials. But, despite having gone through so many horrendous things, he improved himself and became a better person. He was, and still is, able to care, smile, and love.

... What was her excuse? Did she have a reason to not do the same thing, or was she just too stubborn to even try?

The truth was that she didn't *have* an excuse. She had no *reason* to not make an effort.

Just like Subaru ... Perhaps it was time that she took a step forward, too.

Her mind suddenly paused, feeling lost.

... What should she do first?

As she thought about it, her mind gradually drifted to the other people that she'd met. Two of them, in particular.

Emilia was one of them. Pandora couldn't help but feel some sorrow after thinking about what the half-elf had gone through. In truth, Pandora could relate to the girl's life in more ways than one.

They were both tormented and scarred at a young age. They had both been alone, abandoned by most people of the world. They both lost their parents, and the one that they so dearly loved.

Pandora acknowledged that she was the catalyst for nearly all of Emilia's suffering. So ... could she truly relate to her at all?

She shook her head. That didn't matter right now. She still had the resolve to make amends.

... Yes, make amends. That would be her true, first step forward.

She wanted to reconcile with Emilia, not because she felt obligated to, but because she really felt guilt and regret over the things that she's done. In addition, Pandora needed to *properly* tell Emilia that her mother figure was alive.

She knew that it wouldn't be easy, but she would try anyway.

Her feelings extended to Beatrice, as well. Pandora may not have known the Great Spirit for too long, but she had begun to ever-so-slightly warm up to Beatrice. She enjoyed her company and their banter was more amusing than not. Pandora thought that, perhaps, they could potentially become friends.

... Friends. Yes, she really wanted to experience that type of relationship.

However, she knew that there were still other things that needed to be done.

Pandora closed her eyes, focusing deep within herself, calling out and reaching for her Authority. She concentrated on it, doing her best to draw its power and influence the world around her.

She stayed that way for a few seconds, unmoving and focused, only to let out a sigh. She tiredly opened her eyes, looking straight at nothing in particular.

... Nothing had happened. It didn't work.

She wasn't strong enough anymore. Her Authority was split in two, and Subaru possessed the other half. But, for that, she was glad. She knew that it was in good hands.

As she thought about it more, she realized something. Perhaps it wouldn't be a terrible thing to ask for help. They did promise, after all. No matter what obstacles were in their way, they would conquer them together.

Pandora took another deep breath, only for her eyes to catch her reflection in the remains of a broken window. At that, her heart sank.

She could only stare at herself. Or ... was this even really "herself"?

As Pandora looked at her reflection, she only saw the Witch of Vainglory.

She grimaced. For four-hundred years, she perfected this appearance. It was tailor-made to make her appear as a goddess, and perfectly so. Ever since her birth, it was built to be alluring and beautiful.

But Vainglory was truly an ugly being.

Pandora could easily use her Authority to change things, but wasn't that something Vainglory would do?

...

Her arm suddenly shot forward, grabbing a small, sharp, broken piece of glass from the floor.

Without hesitation, she swiped the glass behind her head, cutting the hair up to her shoulders clean off. Long strands of platinum hair hit the floor in one fell swoop.

Pandora didn't entirely realize what she had done until a few moments later. But it didn't bother her at all.

She stood to her feet, feeling lighter than before. She discarded the piece of glass in her hand, unbothered to look at her reflection again.

She felt good, but she wasn't entirely satisfied just yet. She wanted to do more.

Her legs began to carry her out of the room. As she walked, she once again repeated one question in her head, "*Who is Pandora, really?*"

The answer to that question was something that she would have to keep striving toward.

As her thoughts drifted once again, Subaru came to her mind. Before now, they were quite similar to the Yin and Yang. Pandora existed as the darker, more monstrous and evil side, whilst Subaru existed as the light; the ultimate good.

A Sage and a Witch. What an interesting couple, she thought.

Now, it seemed that they were finally drifting away from that dynamic. Perhaps they would meet in the middle. Neither a yin nor a yang, only what was in between.

She felt resolved to face Subaru again. She felt confident in herself. She took the *first step*, and, to her, that was what really mattered the most.

For once, Pandora felt like she was really becoming herself; like she was becoming someone that she wanted to be. It did wonders for her self-confidence.

She wasn't forcing herself to represent her Authority anymore. She wasn't tailoring herself to be the epitome of those ideals. Rather, she was changing because she *wanted* to.

Pandora kept repeating those facts in her head, over and over again. She couldn't help it. Reality almost seemed like fiction to her, in that moment.

But, when she saw Subaru again, she knew for a fact that this was all very, very real.

When he laid eyes on her, he did a double take. Pandora nearly giggled at his reaction. "Woah," he gaped. "You have short hair now. And you seem expressive."

Pandora nodded, needlessly confirming his words. Despite his reaction, she remained confident as she spoke, "I took your words to heart."

Even if Pandora only just voiced her previous resolve to him, she still felt an incredible amount of relief.

"I can tell," he said with a smile. "You look good."

His smile was filled with genuine care and happiness. It was a smile that she could never get enough of. She returned it with her own smile. "Thank you, Baru."

She was truly happy that he accepted her. She already knew that he would, but hearing it actually said aloud instilled a near infinite supply of happiness to her. It warmed her heart, and it made her confident.

"It's a great start," he continued, a knowing look on his face. "I know you'll get to where you want to be, Dora. I believe in you, and I'm really happy that you're starting to believe in yourself, too."

This man was absolutely unbelievable. Really, he was. He knew her too well.

Pandora didn't deserve him. In fact, nobody did. In her eyes, Subaru was really just too good for this world. Even so, she would be sure to cherish him anyway, all while doing her best to give back to him in any way that she could.

That's what he deserved most, in her eyes.

Despite the positive thoughts that ran through her mind, the mood was still bleak. The looming state of the city, and their current situation, would never go away so easily. Even now, as the silence within the room made itself known, the noise from outside was becoming incredibly prominent.

Pandora raised her arms and grabbed Subaru's hands, quickly interlocking their fingers and pressing their palms against one another. He became confused at the sudden action, unsure of what she was trying, or planning, to do.

"I want to try again."

...

That was all Subaru needed to hear in order to understand. He didn't verbally respond, only looking directly into her eyes, straight into her very being and soul.

After a few moments, he found what he was looking for.

These feelings of hers weren't fabricated, nor were they forced. This was something that she *genuinely* wanted to do.

At that moment, Subaru found himself incredibly proud of her.

He nodded to her as he composed himself, as did she. Both of them closed their eyes in preparation, focusing deep within themselves, calling out to their respective

Authorities.

Subaru activated Cor Leonis: Third Shift, letting their souls connect and intertwine just as they had so many other times before. He could feel the connection solidify itself, their Authorities of Vainglory melding to become whole once again.

Then, together, they focused on it. They began to use their Authorities in unison with the sole purpose of changing the world. The hope of bringing everybody back — the hope of fixing all of the damage done — fueled them.

...

Subaru quickly opened his eyes, as did Pandora's. Their hands broke apart in an instant, just as Subaru's deactivated Third Shift.

They both felt their minds begin to wane. If their connection had not been severed, both of them would have lost consciousness within the next couple of seconds. Their bodies suddenly felt weak, both of them hardly able to stand.

For whatever reason, their Authorities of Vainglory, despite becoming whole again, were not compatible. They seemed to conflict with one another, causing great stress and fatigue to the two that tried to use them as one.

Neither of them knew why that was happening, but both of them understood the true gravity of the situation now.

Return by Death was gone and the Authority of Vainglory was split in two, unable to be used as it once had been.

The carnage unleashed would never be undone.

The people that were so unjustly killed would never return.

Pandora would never escape the consequences of her actions.

One day, those consequences would catch up with her. She knew that, and Subaru knew it, too.

They couldn't hide forever.

That was a fact that haunted them both.

It served to further plant self-doubt into Pandora's heart and soul. It solidified the thought that, no matter what, she would always be the Witch of Vainglory. It would always be attached to her, even if she found a new sense of self.

Subaru deeply wished that he could fix it all, to rectify his mistake, but it was impossible. The least he could do was fix his mistakes, but he couldn't even do that.

Even after acknowledging that, however, Subaru remembered that there was something that he could *actually* fix.

His hand practically dug into his pocket. It searched around for only a second, grabbing hold of something hard and smooth. He quickly pulled it out, bringing it in front of him.

The Seal of Eternity. Its symbol glowed like a light in the dark.

When Pandora saw it, her expression changed. It was resolved, determined, yet also nervous.

Subaru understood those feelings well. They both knew who was contained within. Neither of them knew what would happen if either were released. Still, they were both willing to take their chances.

Beatrice — his Beako — was trapped inside. For ten years, she had slaved away to release him. She destroyed herself, both in body and mind, to complete that goal. In the end, she really saved him, and he owed it to her to save her back.

His contracted spirit was more than deserving to be released on her own, but Subaru also thought of Emilia, who was trapped inside with her.

He'd only seen Emilia once since his release. It was when she had killed Petra. Subaru couldn't deny that he felt resentment towards Emilia, because of that.

Even just thinking about that day did more than simply sting. He could still remember holding Petra's body as she died, bloodied and cold with an icicle sticking straight through her chest.

Even so, he understood why Emilia became that way in the first place. She had gotten lonely ... too lonely. She probably felt betrayed and abandoned, feelings he was more than familiar with. He had no doubt that it opened old wounds and left scars on her psyche.

It reminded him of one of his Sanctuary loops, from all that time ago.

He supposed that Petra understood these reasons too, before she died.

He wouldn't let her final wish be in vain. He would do everything he could to help Emilia. He owed that to both Petra and Emilia, at the very least.

He felt the need to apologize to Emilia for leaving her, too. If he hadn't sealed himself away, then she never would have lost her mind. She never would have been alone. Because of that, he felt guilty beyond belief. He desperately wanted to make things right with her.

Pandora, of course, already knew what she wanted to do.

Gradually, their respective thoughts came to a close. The two looked at one another for a good, long moment, wordlessly communicating amongst themselves. A mutual understanding traversed between them.

With that, Subaru looked back down at the seal. He took a deep breath, feeling both conflict and resolve at the same time. He took another breath, this time making sure to properly steel and ready himself for what was about to happen.

He was prepared, as was she.

They were ready.

His thumb swiped across the symbol. The symbol began to glow brighter and brighter until, in a matter of seconds, the light consumed the entire room.